# PATHWAY TO THE COUNTRY

Alicia Edgar

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# Table of Contents


Prologue (Akemi) 6

What's Your Dream? 8

First Things First 14

Our First Concert 20

We Have to Do Something! 30

Nashville 41

Tough Times 55

Confession 67

True Feelings 81

Fly High 89

You Can Shine Too! 103

**Part 2… 115**

A New Beginning 117

Mountain Lullaby 133

Another Chance 148

A Spooky Small Town 158

Miracle Road 171

Time Flies 187

Brentwood! 207

Let’s Sing Together! 224

Can We Shine? 240

A Country Girl’s Fate 250

Tailgate Party! 254

Pathway to the Country 261

**Prologue (Darlene)**

I wanted to be captivated by something. I wanted to do my best at something. I wanted to run forward earnestly, but I didn't know what that something was.I had a dream. That I have the potential to achieve greatness that others can't even envision. To shine bright like the stars in the night sky. The future me was rushing forward, and then…

I landed upon it.

As for me, I'd consider myself to be a normal country girl. I grew up on my father's horse farm, spending my weekends hiking and fishing, sharing my life with a border collie named Dixie, riding horses into the sunset, and preparing Southern stir fry for my family's dinner.

My appearance felt typical as well. My skin was a sun-kissed golden brown from my time outdoors, complemented by dark brown eyes and plain, straight brownish-black hair that fell to my shoulders. I found my hair dull and uninspiring. If I had the choice, I would opt for curly blonde locks and blue eyes, resembling the quintessential image of a country girl.

Yet, there was an aspect of myself that I deemed unusual. I have a deep passion for country music. There's an undeniable quality about it that makes me really happy. Is it the strumming of the guitar? The sound of the fiddles? The drawl of Southern accents? Whatever it is, I truly enjoy listening to it.

By the way, my name is Darlene Johnson. I live in rural Monroe, Georgia. My best friend is Akemi Chiharu. She'll now give you her side of the story.

## Prologue (Akemi)

Um, hi everyone! I'm Akemi Chiharu, Darlene's best friend and bandmate. Unlike Darlene, I don't think I'm really suited to be a country singer. I mean, I've got this bouncy bubblegum pink hair and I can speak Japanese.

Since I come from a Japanese-American family, I don't have much experience with country music. Whenever Darlene brings up a country artist, I'm often left wondering what she means! But I'll do my best to become a great country singer with Darlene's help!

**What's Your Dream?**

The breeze fluttered my hair gently as I sat alone on the fence. I thought back on yesterday's trip to Nashville. Did I really want to become a country singer? Sure, I play the guitar and sing, but is playing in large crowds and being chased by millions of fans really my thing?

Akemi and I had journeyed to Nashville to catch a Florida Georgia Line concert—or rather, I had convinced her to join me. Their performance utterly captivated me. Tyler Hubbard and Brian Kelley exuded charisma on stage, clearly relishing the energy from the crowd! After that exhilarating day, I envisioned us as a famous country duo, akin to Florida Georgia Line, touring across the country and building a fanbase. Yet here I was, a normal country girl, basking in the warm late spring sun while perched on the fence.

*"Konnichiwa*, Darlene!" a familiar voice called, returning me to reality. I looked up to see my best friend, with her vibrant pink hair, waving energetically from afar.

"Hi, Akemi!"

I slid off the fence and ran to her. "Let's go inside the barn," I said.

Taking her hand, we made our way across the pasture to the barn, which had long been our favorite hangout spot. Back when we were younger, Akemi often visited, and we would spend countless hours playing together inside.

“Listen to this,” I said, reaching into my pocket for my pink phone. I opened Spotify and selected "Anything Goes" by Florida Georgia Line from their second album.

"No way?" Akemi said, captivated by the song. "Florida Georgia Line. Yes! I remember it!" She started singing. "Alabama on the boombox baby, 'bout get a little boondock crazy..."

"Geez girl," I said with a chuckle. "Don't you remember us going to the concert yesterday ago?"

Despite my question, Akemi continued to belt out the lyrics. I sighed at her typical air-headedness, then paused the music. She finally snapped back to the moment. “Oh yeah, I remember! It was so much fun!”

"Nashville was so huge! Way bigger than Tokyo."

"Yes, and the line dancing! It was so much fun!"

"I know, right?" Akemi replied, nodding in enthusiasm.

I giggled and restarted the song. Together, we sang along, and I thought our voices blended beautifully; Akemi’s sweet, gentle tone complimented my stronger, more powerful voice.

“Hey, Akemi,” I said after the track ended, “Have you ever thought about trying your best at something?”

“Maybe,” she replied absently.

“I’ve always wanted to do something fun with you since we became best friends,” I continued. “I want us to find an activity that we both enjoy.”

Akemi looked at me, puzzled. “Let me ask you something,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Do you want to become a country singer with me?”

Akemi gasped in surprise. “You want us to become country singers?”

“Is there anything wrong with that?” I inquired.

“Well, no…” she said, fidgeting nervously with her fingers. “But I’m not sure if it’s meant for me. I come from a Japanese family, you know.”

“Sure, but you can absolutely be a country singer, no matter your background,” I reassured her.

“I guess so,” Akemi replied, albeit somewhat hesitantly. She then glanced at her watch, as if feeling the urge to leave. “It’s getting late, Darlene,” she said softly. “I don’t want to be late for dinner. We’re having ramen and sushi tonight.”

“Alright,” I responded. “See you tomorrow.”

Akemi opened the barn door and trudged out. I watched her walk home at a measured pace.

Since there was still daylight, I decided to saddle up Starlight and visit my friend Annabelle, who lived in the woods by the riverside. Like Akemi, Annabelle was one of my closest friends; I’d known her since I was five. We spent much of our childhood playing in the woods alongside Akemi. Annabelle's sharp sense of humor and relaxed demeanor made her delightful company.

Dixie, my loyal dog, chased after me, wagging her tail and barking at the squirrels. She loved accompanying me whenever I rode Starlight.

When I arrived at her house, I secured Starlight's leash to the fence, instructed Dixie to stay put, and made my way along the pathway. Afterward, I knocked on the door. A moment later, Annabelle appeared. Her jeans were splattered with dirt. She adjusted her cowboy hat and flashed a smile.

“Well howdy there, Darlene,” she greeted me in her pronounced Southern drawl. “It’s a pleasure to see you again!”

“It’s nice to see you again as well,” I replied.

“Would you like to come inside?” Annabelle offered. “I made beans on toast, your favorite!”

I could feel my mouth watering. Baked beans on toast was the dish I adored most. Everything about it thrilled me: the soft beans, the warm, crispy bread, and the delightful moment of taking that first bite—m-mm! Annabelle always remembered that baked beans on toast was my favorite and made sure to prepare it whenever I came over.

Inside, a plate of fresh baked beans on toast and a glass of milk sat on the table, waiting for me.

‘'Thanks, Annabelle!" I said. "No problemo!" she said. "Enjoy!"

I sat down and took the first bite. Mmm, heaven!

"So." Annabelle took a seat next to me. "What's the scoop?"

I swallowed. "Have you ever had a dream to do your best in something, but didn't know what your dream was?"

"Not really," she said. "I ain't havin' dreams like that."

"But did you ever have a goal outside of a dream?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Perhaps I should clarify," I began. "My dream is to be a country singer. I’ve wanted to pursue this ever since Akemi and I attended a Florida Georgia concert."

"What the heck is Florida Georgia Line?" Annabelle asked, looking puzzled.

"They're a country music duo from Nashville," I explained. "They've gained immense popularity across the United States. Even though they face some criticism, they've managed to rise above it and become one of the top country music acts in the country. Would you like me to show you?"

"Right now?" Annabelle replied, surprised.

"Absolutely. Just on my phone." I pulled out my device and pulled up the music video for "Cruise" on YouTube. "What do you think of them?" I inquired. Annabelle squinted at the screen. "They look...," she said, narrowing her eyes even more, "normal, I suppose. Or maybe like attractive guys driving a Chevy?"

"That's what left me in awe of their performance," I continued. "I had never seen anything quite like it. To me, they sparkled like stars."

Annabelle looked at me, puzzled. I pressed on. "I always viewed myself as just an ordinary teenager from the South. But then I realized I had the potential to achieve fame just like they have."

A smile spread across Annabelle's face. "I didn't know you admired them that much," she remarked, taken aback. "You seem like such an intriguing person, Darlene."

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes," she affirmed.

My heart soared with joy—finally, I had a friend who supported my dreams of becoming a country singer.

The next day, Akemi and I were taking a walk across the countryside. It was another warm day, so it was the perfect weather to go outside.

"I talked to Annabelle last night," I said. "I said that maybe you could give it a try at being a country singer. And if you don't like it, I'll leave it alone."

Akemi smiled. "You're really serious about it, aren't you?" she said. She stopped walking and turned to face me. "You know what? I've always felt the same way. Since we'd been friends so long, I've always wanted to do something crazy together, just the two of us."

"Akemi," I said, my voice wavering. "I spoke with my parents, and they were supportive of my dream to become a country singer," Akemi shared. My lip trembled.

"Do you really mean it?" I asked, tears of joy welling in my eyes. Akemi nodded. Overjoyed, I wrapped my arms around her in a tight hug.

"I can't breathe!" Akemi laughed, but I knew she felt the excitement too.

"Great!" I exclaimed, raising my fist in the air. "Let's give it our all and become the best country singers in the world!"

**First Things First**

"Hey, Dad," I said. My father was outside on the patio drinking a glass of lemonade. "Hi, Darly Chick," he said affectionately. "Could I talk to you for a sec?" I asked. "Sure," he replied.

I settled down onto the lounge chairs beside my father, who took a sip of his lemonade. "I was reminiscing about the concert in Nashville, you know, Florida Georgia Line. I believe it would be an awesome idea for Akemi and me to form our own country duo and rise to fame."

Dad took another gulp. "Listen, sweetheart," he said. "I hate to let you down, but becoming a country singer is a huge deal."

"But I can sing and play the guitar!" I said. "Here, listen!"

To prove it to him, I fetched my guitar and started strumming the first chords to *Cruise*.

"Baby you're a song, you make me wanna roll my windows down, and cruise," I sang. "Down a back road blowing' stop signs through the middle, every little farm town, with you!"

Dad smiled. "Beautiful," he said. "But you have to sing your own songs besides covers,"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I said. "But you know I suck at writing lyrics.

"That's the issue," Dad remarked. "You need to create outstanding lyrics. Simply performing covers won't suffice. Clearly, that would make you seem unoriginal."

I looked at my dad with melancholic eyes, hoping for some sympathy.

"Don't fret, Darlene," Dad reassured me, giving me a gentle kiss on the cheek. "I believe you'll work it out. You're an incredibly bright girl."

"Thanks," I replied, feeling down.

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"I have no idea what to do," I told Akemi as we relaxed in my room, essentially doing nothing. Seated on my bed, I nervously bit my lower lip, a habit I couldn't shake off. "I'm terrible at writing original songs! Whenever I attempt to create something, my mind just goes blank!"

"Maybe you could try what helps for me," Akemi said, springing up like a doll with elastic in its legs. "I dance it out! Watch."

She hopped on one foot to another with praying arms, barely dancing. I guess she knew a lot of Japanese idol dances from watching anime. She then lost control with her left leg and fell down on her butt. "Ouchy!" she shrieked.

"You okay?" I said. "Yeah, I'm fine," Akemi said sheepishly. "You see what I mean."

She sat down again. "I'll be more serious," she said. "Maybe it can come up in a dream. That’s how my ideas happen."

"But you can't control what you dream," I pointed out. "Dreams are usually unpredictable."

"That's true," said Akemi.

I sat quietly, wondering what I should write a song about. I had read somewhere that Florida Georgia Line got ideas from writing songs in nature, so I guessed the best way to find inspiration would be in nature. And the best way to be in nature was at the park.

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The sun lit up the green grass and bushes with its magical light. Kids were chasing each other around the playground while the adults were on the bench talking with each other. We sat quietly on a picnic table, surveying the scene.

"You know, Akemi," I said, "This kind of reminds me when Tyler Hubbard filmed the music video to *Inside and Out*."

"Kinda," Akemi said, her eyes fixated on the kids. We silently watched the children happily laughing and screaming with joy as they ran around being so carefree.

It kinda reminded me of our childhood, when me and Akemi would jump in puddles on rainy days, seeing who could jump the farthest, and climb trees and see who could climb the highest. It made me miss my childhood, and how easy it was. Being a teenager was not easy, and I was about to be eighteen.

"I know!" Akemi suddenly said. She snapped her fingers. "You could write a song about how much you love the countryside."

"Didn't Florida Georgia Line already do that?" I said.

"Yeah," Akemi said. "But you could get inspiration and write your own song about your country."

"I guess that would not be a bad idea," I said thoughtfully. I sat for a bit, letting that idea sink in. Honestly that didn't sound like a bad idea at all. In fact it would probably be something that I would do.

Suddenly, I was inspired. "Let's go home," I said to Akemi.

Back at home, I pulled out a sheet of paper and pencils. I quickly started writing, my pencil gliding around the paper. Akemi watched me. "You really love country music, don't you?" she said. I didn't know how to answer that, so I just smiled and continued writing.

A few minutes later, I thrust the lyrics sheet in front of her. "What do you think?" I said. Akemi gingerly took the sheet and studied it carefully. "It's really good! I'm sure everyone will love them." But I knew better.

That evening, I saddled up Starlight to go for a ride. I knew it wasn't a good idea to ride horses when it was dark, but tonight I really needed to clear my mind. The moon hovered over me, tracking Starlight's movement.

Were the lyrics really that meaningful? I mean, I wrote down everything that came to mind. Would everyone like it? Would we become famous?

I passed by Akemi's house, and heard singing and strumming of a guitar. I strained my ears so I could hear the song. "Sometimes I wanna slow down, catch a roll out some red-rock road, let it all sink in, like these 35's..."

I knew that song! It was *35's*! By Tyler Hubbard! Starlight stopped trotting, as if she heard the music, too. I slid off my horse and ran to Akemi's bedroom window, and clapped from the outside. Akemi looked startled.

"Who is that?" she shrieked. "It's me, silly goose," I said. "Tyler Hubbard! From Florida Georgia Line. Is that 35's?"

"Yes it is!" Akemi said. "I love that song!"

"Me too," I said.

It seemed, right at that moment, that we shared a love of the same music and from that, we might just have a chance at making the dream of being country singers a reality.

"Have you finished the lyrics?" Akemi said. "No, not yet," I answered. "But I'll give it my best shot!

**Our First Concert**

“We need to be serious about this," I told Akemi. We were in the barn, talking about our upcoming plans for our country duo and enjoying strawberry mochi that Akemi had brought along. Akemi had a passion for strawberry mochi and frequently brought it with her during our practice sessions.

'This is no time for fun and games. We gotta work hard, play hard, and make this dream that we have a reality!’’

Akemi nibbled nervously on her mochi. "You're right, Darlene. We gotta do this correctly!"

"So," I said. "First we gotta think of a place to perform." As we were speaking, the door swung open. Annabelle came out, sporting a Yankees baseball cap and sunglasses.

"Wassup, y'all," she said. "Watcha doin?"

"We need to think of a place to perform," I explained.

"Holy macaroni!" Annabelle exclaimed. "Y'all are not foolin' me, are ya?"

"Heck no," I said. "You wanna help us?"

"Sure," Annabelle said. She sat down on a bale of hay next to us. I turned on my laptop and did a Google search on the best venues to perform near me. A page popped up listing some of the biggest concert spots in the state of Georgia. For a moment we all stared at the page - just thinking about getting on stage at one of these professional venues was scary, to say the least.

We looked at each other for one shocked moment. Then we all burst out laughing. "What in tarnation?" Annabelle gasped, taking off her sunglasses and wiping her eyes. "This is just too funny."

"What the hell is this?" I exclaimed. "There's no freakin' way we're gonna perform here!"

"We need to find a smaller area to perform," Akemi said.

"But where?" I said.

"Let's not worry about that for now," Annabelle said, smiling. "First, y'all need to figure out a name for your group."

Right, naming our group. How could I forget? But what should we name our group? "How about Tokyo Monroe Line?" Akemi suggested. "Probably not," I said. "That would be copying."

"I have an idea," Annabelle said. "Maybe y'all could host a group namin' competition. Y'all could go to the city and round up some people to vote for a good name for your group."

"That actually doesn't sound like a bad idea, Annabelle," I said thoughtfully. "In fact that sounds like a good idea."

"Shall I tag along?" Annabelle said. "Nah," I said. "Akemi and I can take care of it. Thanks."

Atlanta was way different from the countryside. Even though I had gone there before, I wasn't all that familiar with the place. We were excited and we headed into downtown Atlanta eager to start. Atlanta was big - but it had a good feel to it. We figured that the best place to find people who would take our flyers would be at Chastain Park. The area was lively with people walking, jogging, sitting, and unwinding. Akemi and I scanned our surroundings.

"Now what?" Akemi said. "We have tons of fliers."

"Just watch what I do!" I said. I walked up to a trio of girls hanging out around the fountain. "Hi, there!" I called out. One of the girls looked up. She had long blonde hair with one part tied in a Ariana-Grande

style pony tail and the rest down and blue eyes.  She looked just like a real country girl, so different from the straight dark hair and brown eyes I had.

"Hello," she greeted me. "What’s going on?"

"We're holding a group naming contest," I replied, feeling like a seasoned marketer. "We're going to be country singers!"

"Country singers?" another girl interjected, adjusting her glasses and glancing at me with her short black hair framing her face. "How old are you?"

"I'm seventeen," I replied. "Isn’t that a bit too young?" asked the third girl, who had red hair pulled back into a ponytail and striking green eyes.

"Not at all," I said with confidence. "I believe in myself. My best friend and I are committed to making this work."

"How long have you been performing?"

"Not at all yet," I responded. "But we plan to start soon."

"That's great."

"Anyway," I continued, "we need to come up with a name for our group. There’s a competition where people can submit names for us. Would you like to help us out?"

"Sure, I guess," the girl with blonde hair replied. "By the way, who are you?"

"I'm Darlene," I introduced myself. "Darlene Johnson."

"That's a lovely name. I'm Caroline, and these are my best friends, Mavis and Brittney." The other girls waved at me shyly. "Thank you for your help," I said, handing them a flier.

"Thanks," Caroline said as she took the flier from my hands. "Well, see you around, Darlene."

"See you!" I responded as I turned to head back to Akemi, who was still standing where I had left her. She appeared nervous and was nervously fidgeting with her fingers.

"Did you hand out any fliers?" I said. "No." Akemi said shakily. "I'm not good with this stuff as you are."

"Don't worry, Akemi," I said. "Here, let's do this together."

I grasped her hand and guided her toward a woman seated on a bench, perusing a magazine. Her two children were playing together in the sandbox. “Excuse me, ma'am,” Akemi said. “I... um...”

“Hello there, young lady,” the woman replied warmly. “What can I help you with?”

“Umm...” Akemi hesitated, fiddling with her fingers, then continued, “We’re organizing a naming contest for our group. Darlene and I are planning to become country singers.”

“That sounds wonderful,” the woman said. “I’d like to participate in the contest.”

‘’Um, sure,” Akemi responded as she handed the flier to the lady.

“Thank you,” the woman said.

Akemi turned to me. "See? That wasn't so bad," I said.

"Yeah."

"You wanna split up or should we do this together?" I asked. "Maybe you could help me one more time?" she asked. "Sure!" I said. "Anything for my best bandmate."

By the end of the day, we had sold almost all of our fliers. There were only two left, so Akemi and I decided to keep those as extras.

"I wonder if people will choose to vote for us," I remarked as we were making our way home from Atlanta. I was behind the wheel because I had my driver's license. "I really hope so," Akemi replied. "What if people decide not to vote?" she inquired with concern. "I really hope so," I responded. We continued our journey in silence for the remainder of the trip.

A few days later, I was chilling in my room watching FGL music videos when my father called me downstairs.  "Hey, Darlene," he said when I came. "There's mail for you."

Perhaps our name has already been submitted. A sudden flutter of anxiety stirred in my stomach. “It’s not directed to anyone specific. It merely says... Tokyo Cowgirls,” Dad commented.

“Tokyo Cowgirls...” Akemi mused, examining the piece of paper. “What an intriguing name.”

“Well, you are Japanese, and cowboys symbolize country music,” I pointed out.

“That's true,” Akemi replied. “It does seem significant.”

“Let’s go with that,” I suggested.

“Absolutely,” she agreed. “I really like that name.”

“Great!” I announced. “From this day forward, we shall be known as Tokyo Cowgirls!”

Throughout that week, we practiced our song, promoted our concert online, and received a lot of encouragement from our friends. The night before our inaugural concert, Akemi and I met by the riverside to offer our prayers. We stood together, gazing out at the vast blue water. The night sky sparkled with stars, and the air was fresh and invigorating.

"May our first concert be a great success." I prayed. "No, a huge success!"

"Please don't let me get too nervous," Akemi whispered.

"Please make all our dreams come true!" I pleaded to God. We held hands, and the both of us stood there, basking in the heavenly night sky. I hoped God was listening to us.

"Tomorrow's the big day," I said softly. "I can't wait."

The preparations for the first concert were progressing smoothly. We had selected a small venue in the city for our performance in Atlanta. The only thing we still required was a person to manage the stage effects.

‘’Are you going to help us?” I asked Annabelle with enthusiasm. “Absolutely!” she replied. “You all want to have a rehearsal, right? You've got my full support.”

I lit up with joy. “Thanks, Annabelle!” I said, feeling grateful. “No problemo,” Annabelle responded.

Sadly, it was a rainy day. On top of that, a fierce thunderstorm was rolling in. A loud crack of thunder rumbled outside, and the rain poured down as if a massive faucet was turned on.

"I'm not very used to this," said Akemi. "Is it okay for it to be short?"

"It'll be fine," I said. "Florida Georgia Line did a short concert too when they first performed."

"My legs are shaking," Akemi said. "What if I faint?"

"Once you get onstage, you'll be too busy singing your heart out, you'll forget about it," I reassured her. We heard the sounds of the audience outside the curtain. "It's almost time," I said.

"What should we say to start off?" Akemi wondered. "Let's count down from one to three," I said.

"Sure," said Akemi. "Okay!" I said. "One!"

"Two!"

"Three!" we both said, hoisting our arms up in the air!

Gradually but steadily, the curtain rose, unveiling a small audience of spectators. We gaped in silence, feeling a bit perplexed. Taking a deep breath, I released Akemi's hand. "We're country singers, ready to perform!" I declared. "We are the country duo, Tokyo Cowgirls!" We chimed in unison.

"The brilliance of our countryside and its strength inspire us," Akemi added. "Our aim is to become just like the country duo, Florida Georgia Line!" I chimed in. "We ask for your support!" Just then, we heard the click of the spotlight turning on, indicating it was time for us to begin. I struck the first few chords and then launched into the performance.

"I grew up overshadowed by tall mountains. Couldn't catch an eye of no city girl..."

Akemi joined in. "Here I am, devoted to you. How I love the way you look in your blue jeans..."

During the performance, a sudden loud pop echoed throughout the venue, catching us off guard. We instinctively covered our ears in fear. When the noise subsided, we found ourselves enveloped in total

darkness. It took a moment for us to understand what had occurred. The strong winds from the storm had likely caused a power outage.

We exchanged stunned glances. “Um, Darlene?” Akemi asked. “What should we do now?” The concert didn’t go as planned, but we had to press on.

"The morning light shines down on you and me, as you take my hand, and we skip on down to the riverside," I sang, struggling to hold back tears.

"I hope everything will stay the same as usual," Akemi sang.

"The sun shines bright, the pasture stays green, thank you god..." I stopped mid-sentence. Forget it. Our concert was ruined. Tears streamed down my face and fell onto my guitar.

I gently set my guitar down beside me, lowered my head, and began to cry. Akemi approached and gave my shoulder a comforting pat. I could see that she was fighting back tears as well.

While I was sobbing, I didn't hear my father calling me from the venue.

"You goofball!" he exclaimed. "You gave me the wrong start time!"

I wiped my eyes and looked up. The power had returned! The spotlights illuminated us, rendering the audience nearly invisible.

"Annabelle had arranged for a generator to keep the electricity running for your concert," Dad explained.

I squinted against the bright light and saw that our audience had increased since earlier. The venue was now filled with eager spectators ready to see us perform.

Oh my gosh, I was such a goofball. In fact, I was the biggest goofball ever. I brushed off my embarrassment, picked up my guitar, and we were ready to continue!

"The morning light shines down on you and me, as you take my hand, and we skip on down to the riverside!" we belted out together. "I hope everything stays the same as always. The sun keeps on shining, the pasture is sparkling, just you and me, we'll be stars in the sky!"

Pretty soon, I strummed the last chords, and the audience clapped and roared for us. Akemi and I glanced at each other, amazed. I was smiling hard, my cheeks felt like cherries. I raised my hand, and we gave each other a high-five.

"Darlene!" Annabelle called out. "Annabelle!" I shouted back.

She ran over to the stage and spread out her arms in a hug. I ran into them happily.

"That was the best performance I've ever seen!" Annabelle exclaimed. "Even when you all were unable to sing because of the power issues, you persevered and delivered an amazing performance."

"Thanks, Annabelle," I said. Just when I thought it couldn't get any better, the audience erupted in applause once more. Emotions swelled within me, but this time, they were tears of happiness. My friends and I gathered in a heartfelt group hug, shedding joyful tears together. It was an unforgettable debut for the Tokyo Cowgirls!

**We Have to Do Something!**

"This is incredible!" I shouted. It was a warm late-spring day, and we were relaxing in my bedroom when we found out that our ranking had finally improved on the CMA website. "This is incredible!" I repeated, still caught up in the excitement. The CMAs, or Country Music Association Awards, ranked all the talent in country music and determined who would progress to the finals. Those who made it to the final round would perform at the Grand Ole Opry, showcasing their skills alongside the best of the best. Our ranking had gone from 360 to 325!

"I had no idea this was possible," Akemi said, astonished. "I was convinced we were going to fail."

Just then, the door swung open, and Annabelle rushed into the room, looking out of breath. "You guys!" she exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" I asked, sensing her urgency. "I overheard... I overheard..." she struggled to catch her breath, and in a tight voice, she exclaimed, "Your horse farm is shutting down!"

"Shutting down?!" Akemi and I gasped in disbelief.

"Yes," Annabelle replied. "Apparently, not many people are renting horses for lessons anymore. The income has been dropping. If it falls to zero or below, that will be the end of your ranch."

"That's awful!" I responded. "That's my home! If it shuts down, I'll have to leave the countryside. I can't leave you guys behind!"

"It's okay," Akemi reassured me. "We can always call and chat online."

"I suppose," I said sadly. "But it just won't be the same."

The three of us sprawled out in my room, lost in thought. "What on earth are we going to do?" I lamented. "I don't want to lose my home!"

"Well... if we organize more live concerts, we might attract more people who would bring their horses to the ranch," Akemi suggested thoughtfully.

"That could work," Annabelle agreed.

"Definitely," I said, hopeful.

We did some more thinking and finally we came up with a good idea: Creating a promotional video for our group!

I was convinced this would capture people's attention. Once they saw the advertisement for my ranch, I was certain many would stop by and spend their money. We decided to visit Akemi's house to inform her older sister that we would be away for a bit.

Akemi and her sister shared a strong bond. They frequently watched anime together, went shopping for clothes at the mall, and practiced those unique Japanese idol dances. I never quite understood their fascination with those activities.

Upon arriving at the Chiharu residence, Akemi knocked on the door, and out came a slender girl with short black hair and straight bangs. Her bright blue eyes resembled the ocean.

"This is my sister, Sora," Akemi said. "Sora, this is Darlene. Darlene, this is Sora."

Sora waved shyly. I waved back.

"Um, sis?" Akemi said. "Darlene and I were gonna make a promo video for the Tokyo Cowgirls. Is it ok if I come home later than usual?"

"That's fine," Sora said. "Just come home before dark, though."

"Thanks, sis," said Akemi. I smiled and started to walk away, but Akemi stopped. "Is it true that Darlene's horse farm is shutting down?" she asked her sister.

"It's not something you should be worried about," Sora said reassuringly.

But Akemi did look worried.

"Go on now," Sora said. "You girls have some work to do for your promo video."

We decided to film the video down by the riverside, with the help of Annabelle, thinking it would be a nicer scene to film than the barn.

"What's so good about Monroe, anyway?" Akemi said.

I thought for a minute. "People who are from Nashville don't know about this town, right?" I said. "So we have to start off by telling people about the good things here."

"A promo video, huh?" Annabelle said. "Yes," I said. "We'll put this on YouTube, so that way, everyone will see." Annabelle started the camcorder and aimed it at Akemi.

"Wh-what?" she stammered. "Me?" She jumped back. "No, no. I can't. I really can't."

"Come on, Akemi," I said. "It's just a video that we're making."

"I reckon she's camera-shy," Annabelle whispered.

The recording took about an hour. We didn't make it that far in success. Akemi had stage fright, I kept messing up my lines, and when we attempted to film in downtown Monroe, we encountered restrictions at certain locations, including the library where filming was forbidden.

"The big city is just a short drive away!" Annabelle recited. "And it has heaps of shops!"

We had to ride our bikes to reach the Village Shopping Center plaza, which was situated at the top of a hill. Sweat trickled down our faces as we struggled to push our bikes up the steep incline. Annabelle had difficulty keeping hold of the camera as the weight of her bike pushed her back. By the time we finally arrived at the plaza, we felt like we were on the verge of collapsing on the pavement.

"You will discover... the Target and McDonald's located in the Village Shopping Center," I exclaimed, before collapsing to the ground from fatigue.

"That's not close at all!" Akemi griped, also sinking to the ground.

"And it takes half an hour to ride a bike to the city!" Annabelle added with a groan.

As I lay on the pavement, desperate for breath, my stomach rumbled. After putting in a lot of effort on a promo video, I found myself quite hungry, especially since I had only eaten yogurt for breakfast. I stole a glance at the nearby McDonald's and suddenly had a strong craving for a juicy quarter pounder accompanied by hot, greasy French fries.

Akemi and Annabelle were equally famished. Since it was lunchtime, we opted to stop by McDonald's for quarter pounders and fries to satisfy our hunger.

At McDonald's, the three of us shared a large order of French fries and each enjoyed a strawberry milkshake. I nervously nibbled on a fry while Akemi eagerly slurped her shake.

"How did the video come out?" I asked Annabelle.

"I'm doin' some editing right now," she said. She typed something into her laptop. "But it ain't lookin' the way I wanted to. Nothin' special."

I sadly took a bite of my cheeseburger. Creating a promotional video proved to be far more challenging than we expected. On the internet they made it look so easy -- just record, edit, and post -- but brainstorming ideas was very difficult for us.

"I'm stuffed," Akemi said, standing up. "I'm going home."

"Ditto here," Annabelle said. "Shall we resume tomorrow?"

I paused for a moment, contemplating her proposal.

"Darlene?" Annabelle said. "You good?"

I snapped out of it. "Yeah, I'm okay."

That evening, after struggling to find a comfortable position in bed for a while, I decided to call Akemi. "We can't give up now," I told her. "This is about my home. Moving to the city would be really tough for me because I cherish the countryside."

"I understand," she responded. "We're all here to support you, Darlene."

"Thanks," I replied, slowly pressing the "end call" button on my phone.

I rolled over to my other side. If I wanted to see what country music promotional videos looked like, I figured I should check some examples on YouTube for inspiration. I got up from my bed, went to my desk, and took out my laptop. Once I logged into my account, I entered "youtube.com" into the search bar.

When the website loaded, I typed "Florida Georgia Line Cruise promo video" into the search field. The search results appeared, and I clicked on the first video, which was exactly what I needed.

I watched for a few minutes, allowing my inspiration to absorb. The song we performed at the venue a few weeks earlier, which we had titled "Butterfly Fly High," came from a poll we conducted on Instagram to decide on the name of our first song. Thinking back to our inaugural concert, it hadn't been fantastic. If only the power hadn't gone out and I hadn't been sobbing uncontrollably. Regardless, I really needed to come up with a strong promo video concept to save my ranch.

Florida Georgia Line's promo video for "Cruise" mainly featured clips from their music video while encouraging viewers to check it out. I could do something similar, but we faced the challenge of not having a music video to begin with. It would have been great to reach out to Vevo to film one for us, but that would likely be quite costly. What a disappointment.

My phone buzzed. It was a text from Annabelle.

*Hey Darlene!! Do you think it'd be ok with ya if you could*

*post this video on the internet?*

I promptly responded to her message and launched our group chat on Google Chats. I swiftly combined the videos using my editing software, then uploaded them to YouTube. After completing that task, I shut my laptop and returned to bed. Perhaps, just perhaps, the video might go viral.

The following morning, I took my laptop out of my bag and logged onto YouTube to see how many views our video had received. Akemi and Annabelle crowded against me.

"Hey, personal space," I said. I took a deep breath and clicked on the video.

"Hey look," I exclaimed. "32 views in one day!"

"There's a comment," Akemi pointed out.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw what the comment said.

*Nice try, amateurs, but there's no way you'll be able to be*

*compete with the other country singers.*

We stared at the screen, shocked to our bones. What the heck was wrong with that person? We practiced and performed and yet we got this treatment?

.....

"I don't get it," Akemi said. "I just don't get it." We were taking a walk together at the park, since it was a beautiful spring afternoon. "Why would they do this?"

"Eh," I said. "I pretty much expected for this to happen."

"Maybe we should try something different," Akemi said. "How about after lunch, we meet at my house to figure out what to do for the promo video?"

"Sure," I said. "Sounds like fun."

When I got home, Dixie greeted me with her puppy kisses. As always, she was very happy to see me. She trotted after me to the kitchen so I could make myself a turkey sandwich.

....

"Hi, Mrs. Chiharu," I said politely when I stepped inside the Chiharu residence. "Where's Akemi?"

"She's in her bedroom," she answered. Mrs. Chiharu didn't speak much English, so her words were kinda hard to understand because of her heavy accent.

I went to Akemi's room. It was a very untidy and small bedroom with lots of Anime merch and Sanrio plushies lying around. For some reason, I was drawn to bedrooms filled with a variety of intriguing items scattered about.

"Hey," Akemi said, smiling. "Hey," I said.

"So," she said as I sat down on her bed. "What are we doing about the promo video?"

"I was thinking to myself," I said thoughtfully, "that maybe it doesn't have to be us showing off our town and stuff."

"True," Akemi said. "So maybe we should do something else instead."

"Like what?"

"We have a song that we could use for a music video," Akemi said. "So maybe we could do that."

"But here's the problem. We can't contact an expensive filming studio to film the video for us," I pointed out.

"We could ask Annabelle to film," Akemi said.

"That's true," I said.

So eventually, we went with that. We asked Annabelle if she could help us, and she happily agreed. We spent the rest of the day in the barn writing the storyboard, defining roles, and editing the storylines. We were like a real film studio. But not really. This would be an unofficial music/promo video.

The next day, we were ready to film the music video. We had all the extras ready to act in the scene, and we decided to film at the horse farm in the early morning. It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining, the green meadows were full of wildflowers, and the horses, including Starlight, were neighing and whinnying happily. I couldn't stand to have my home be lost. We needed to do something to save my home, and this was it.

By the end of the day, the filming was completed, the editing was done, and the music video was finally uploaded to the internet. That evening after dinner, I walked by the river to reflect on my day. Hopefully this video will go viral. And hopefully the person who criticized our performance would not be criticizing our video.

I stared at my reflection in the water, and smiled proudly like a peacock spreading its wings. Pretty soon the Tokyo Cowgirls would become very popular and rule the CMA awards! And not only that, my ranch would be saved!

**Nashville**

The moment our music video hit that upload button was exhilarating, but we could only dream of what was to come. Three weeks crawled by, filled with nervous anticipation and constant refreshing of the YouTube page. Then it happened: 50,000 views!!! The number seemed unreal, a testament to something bigger than ourselves. More than just the views, it was the outpouring of support that truly floored us. Our comment section was a tapestry of positivity. Viewers gushed about the lush scenery of our farm, describing it as breathtaking and idyllic. They showered us with compliments on our singing, using words like "harmonious," "soulful" and "captivating." Some even expressed a desire to visit the farm and meet us in person, a humbling thought that made us realize the impact we were having on the country music industry.

But the ultimate validation came when we checked the rankings. We had climbed an astonishing number of spots and landed in 10th place!!! A collective gasp of pure elation echoed through the farm house. It felt surreal, like stepping into a world where dreams became a reality. This wasn't just a fleeting moment of success, it felt like a pivotal turning point. The thought, whispered at first, then spoken with increasing conviction, began to take hold; if we could continue this momentum, keep rising in the ranks, maybe, just maybe, we could actually achieve the impossible. We could become the champions of country music, a goal that suddenly felt within reach, fueled by the support of our viewers and the magic of that little music video.

All of a sudden, a notification popped up from my computer. I clicked on it.

"What is that?" Akemi said. "To the members of Tokyo Cowgirls," I read. "The Nashville Country Music Festival..."

"Isn't it the capital of Tennessee?" I said. "Your description is a bit obvious," Akemi pointed out.

We needed a moment to fully process the email. When it finally registered, it felt like we had struck gold!

"Nashville!" we exclaimed.

This was a dream come true! We couldn't believe we made it this far! We were going to participate in the Nashville Country Music Festival! We would compete with country singers across America! Imagine performing on a stage with Florida Georgia Line!

"Nashville?" Dad said after I had broken the news. He sounded worried for some reason. "Yes," I said. "They invited us to sing at an event."

"A music festival event in Nashville," Dad said. He said it like the words were rolling around in his mouth as if he was chewing tobacco.

"It's a proper event," I explained. "Lots of country singers, old and new, will be there."

"Sweetie.." Dad whispered. "So we can't go?" I said.

"Do you have enough money to travel alone?"

"Akemi has an allowance that she can get an advance on," I said. "It'll be fine."

When my father heard this, he turned and started to leave. "Wait, Dad!" I said. He stopped. My stomach tightened. Maybe I had said something wrong. "Um, does it bother you? Me staying a country singer..."

"Darlene..." Dad's voice trailed off, then came back. "You decided to become a country singer of your own will, right?"

"Yes," I said quietly. "Then it doesn't matter what anybody else thinks." Dad continued. "Right?"

"True," I said. "I'm sorry. I might be making things hard for you," Dad said. I stared at him, confused. What was he apologizing for?

"You don't have to worry about it," I said.

"It's getting late." he said. "You should get to bed." He went over to me and kissed my forehead.

"You'll do great tomorrow, girl."

"Thanks." I said. Dad smiled sheepishly, and walked upstairs to shower.

Finally the day came. Dad made me a bowl of cereal, which I was too nervous to eat. I stared at the Cheerios floating on top of the white milk. It reminded me of something, but I didn't know what.

"Darlene?" Dad said as he came into the kitchen. "Be strong, okay?" He said, winking. "Show them all that you got!"

"Thanks, Dad," I said. "And eat your cereal," he said. "You can't leave with an empty stomach."

After breakfast, we all piled into Dad's car to drive to the train station. It was hot and muggy outside, since it was early June. On the ride to the train station, I pressed my nose against the window, my mind frantically thinking about all the things I would get to do once we got to Nashville. Maybe we could go to a country music merch store, pick out some t-shirts and other stuff, or we could learn to line dance...

"Hey, Darlene?" Akemi said, interrupting me from my racing thoughts. "If I accidentally speak Japanese, will you stop me? Pretty please?"

"Sure," I said.

"Thanks," said Akemi.

Before long, Dad pulled into the parking lot of the train station. It was overflowing with vehicles, as many people were traveling during the summer season.

"Bye Darlene," Dad said. "Have fun in Nashville."

"Thanks," I said, planting a kiss on his cheek. I stepped out of the car and ran inside the train station. Akemi had to make a phone call with her mom to let her know we were there, so I surveyed the crowds of people waiting for their train rides. Through the window, I saw a familiar muddy pickup truck pull up.

"Howdy, Darlene!" Annabelle called out.

"Hey, Annabelle!" I called out. I ran over to her pickup truck.

"I wanted to give you a little somethin' for your trip," Annabelle explained. She had a blue Walmart bag hooked around her arm that smelled like beans and freshly baked bread. She revealed to me a small casserole dish with tin foil on top.

"It's beans on toast," Annabelle said. "You can eat it while y'all are on the road."

"Thanks," I said happily. I took it from her and breathed in the heavenly aroma of bread and beans.

It took nearly four hours by train to reach Nashville. My gaze was transfixed by the scenery unfolding outside the window, a mix of soaring mountains, winding rivers, worn houses, and quaint horse stables. The sight of those stables brought Starlight immediately to mind. My heart ached for her, imagining her alone there. Then I remembered -- she wasn't really alone, not with all the other horses around her.

We arrived at the Nashville train station at about 3:00, one hour back from Georgia. Nashville was very different from Monroe from what I thought. Back in Monroe, it was a lot quieter, people were friendlier,

and way more diverse. In Nashville, it looked like everyone was White. There were crowds of white Americans everywhere. I didn't see a single Black, Latina, or Asian anywhere.

"That's weird," I said. "I don't see anyone that isn't white."

"Don't worry about it," Akemi whispered. Then I saw it. The ad for the country music festival! It was shown on a tv screen at the Nashville train station. I studied it. Surprisingly, it hadn't changed that much since I was last there.

"Oh my gosh! Is that Luke Bryan?" I gushed. "He looks so cute!"

"Sugoi!" Akemi exclaimed. "Kawaii!" I rushed over to her and clamped my hand over her mouth before she could utter another Japanese word. "Oh, right," she muttered, remembering what she had promised me in the car.

"It's okay," I said.

The Music Festival wasn't until tomorrow, so we ended up going to a country music merch store right across the street from the bus station. They called Nashville, Music City, all right! The shop had a variety of CDs, t-shirts, baseball caps, and backpacks from various country artists.

"Ooh, so cute!" I heard Akemi say. I was surprised that she even found something that she liked. Normally she was more interested in K-Pop and J-Pop merch. Too bad there wasn't an anime convention around here.

After we went shopping, we took a bus to go to the Country Music Hall of Fame. Once we stepped out, it was almost dark. I didn't realize we came this late.

"Oh no!" I groaned. "We ran out of time!"

"So?" said Akemi. "I wanted to spend a while here before our concert," I complained. I then realized that Akemi was dressed in cowboy boots and a hat instead of her usual outfit. "Um, why are you wearing that?" I asked. "Yeehaw! Come on, you said we were going to a museum!" Akemi replied, her Southern accent surprisingly good. "Does it look good on me?"

"Lovely," I said, keeping my gaze straight ahead. We wandered around for a bit until something piqued my interest. "Look at this!" I exclaimed, picking up a guitar that I spotted on display. But this was no ordinary guitar; it had "Florida Georgia Line" etched into the corner. It smelled of fresh wood and had yet to be played. "It's the guitar that Florida Georgia Line always used!"

Akemi was smiling hard. "Yeah..." she murmured.

"Shall I sing a song?" I said. "Yes!" Akemi said. FGL had practiced with this guitar right in Nashville, with their sights on winning the CMA awards. It was amazing what they could do!

As I sang and strummed the guitar, I felt like I was flying. Higher and higher into the sky until I could practically feel the soft wispy clouds caressing my hands. Once I was done, a different voice came through the room. It sounded like someone older, like in their twenties or thirties.

I noticed a young woman with vibrant curly orange hair, dressed in a white sundress and cowboy boots. She was unfamiliar to me—neither from magazines nor television, nowhere at all. I set down the guitar and approached to see what was happening. Her voice was enchanting, reminiscent of an angel. It was perfect, effortlessly hitting the high notes, unlike my own. I could listen to her sing forever. I stood there, entranced by the beauty of her voice.

The girl whirled around, her bright purple eyes squinting, upper lip curled downwards. I got a bad feeling. Maybe she liked singing alone.

"Hi," I finally managed, feeling a little foolish now.

"What do you want?" she shouted, the angelic voice now sharp and laced with irritation. "Can't you see I'm practicing for the CMA awards?"

"You're a country singer, too?" I asked, genuinely shocked. Her voice was phenomenal, but her attitude...

Her face turned red, mirroring the fiery halo of her hair. I resisted the urge to call her "tomato girl."

"Of course I am, idiot," she snapped. "I'm Courtney Jones, the best country singer in all of America!"

For some reason, the pronouncement sounded less like a confident declaration and more like an evil queen accepting her crown.

"I'm a country singer, too," I said quietly. "I'm Darlene Johnson."

"Darlene?" Courtney laughed, a surprisingly deep and unpleasant sound that didn't match her seemingly delicate features. "That sounds like a fat old lady's name. What are you, from the '50s?"

I remained silent, suddenly self-conscious. I didn't particularly like the name Darlene, but I never had. I guess it was the name my parents wanted me to have or something.

"I saw your music video," Courtney continued, her voice dripping with disdain. "It was, like, the lamest thing I ever saw."

So *she* was the one who dissed our video. I knew some people didn't like it, but to hear it from her stung.

"We worked really hard on our video," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "It took like 24 hours to complete. So you can't talk down to us like that."

Courtney drew back, seemingly genuinely shocked, a flicker of anger in her purple eyes. "Amateur," she muttered, then turned on her heel and stormed off, her cowboy boots kicking up dust as she went.

It was quite late, so we decided to take the bus back to our hotel. We had accomplished a great deal today, yet for some reason, instead of feeling exhausted, I was brimming with energy. Perhaps it was the excitement for the concert happening tomorrow.

After showering, we enjoyed the beans on toast that Annabelle had given me during our journey. We turned in for the night early, knowing we needed a good night's rest for the concert the next day. However, for some reason, I found it difficult to fall asleep. Lying there wide awake, I gazed at the ceiling, searching for a way to unwind. I squeezed my eyes closed, yet they kept relentlessly popping back open.

"Hey, Darlene," Akemi whispered. "Yes?" I said. "I can't sleep," said Akemi. "Me too," I said.

"I thought you really loved sleeping," Akemi pointed out."Yeah, but it doesn't feel like the right time for sleeping, not when we're both hanging out like this," I said.

"I feel the same way," Akemi said. "And I'm also really excited about the concert tomorrow, so it's hard for me to sleep."

"I feel you," I said. I sat up from my bed. "You know, Nashville has been famous for country music for a long time," I explained.

"I don't know if it's because we discovered Florida Georgia Line when we went there the first time. They were just so cool, and now we decided to be country singers, too. There are just so many expectations for being a country singer, and it's so overwhelming."

"I see," Akemi said.

"I don't hate being a country singer, it's just... I have to live up to so many expectations. We wrote songs, and we practiced a lot. The first concert wasn't really the best, but at least we tried," I went on. "Does that ever happen to you?'

I looked at Akemi, expecting an answer. She had a worried expression on her face and seemed to be processing what I had just said. I nudged her. "Akemi?"

"When we left Monroe, Annabelle went to see us off, right?" Akemi said. "I was happy, but it was actually kind of scary. I reminded myself that I had to live up to their expectations. I couldn't fail."

"Akemi..."

"Sorry. I was just rambling," she said.

"It's okay," I said. "Thank you."

"Huh?" Akemi said, confused. I smiled. "Let's get some sleep. For tomorrow."

"Sure," said Akemi.

Somehow I drifted off, and the next thing I knew, sunlight was squirting into my face. I stretched and glanced at Akemi, who was still sleeping.

I got dressed and packed my performance outfit into my backpack for the concert later. I decided to go for a run outside, since it would give me a chance to explore the city. Akemi was still sleeping, so I quietly left our bedroom.

The buildings looked like they were sparkling in the sunlight. It was beautiful. I inhaled the fresh early morning breeze. Then I took off, like a rocket flying into outer space.

As I raced onward, structures, trees, and individuals strolling with their dogs zipped by me. The sound of country music echoed from all around. My long, dark hair streamed behind me as I picked up speed. I didn't feel fatigued at all. Running brought me joy. It felt as though I were soaring through the air. I could run endlessly.

Soon I reached the train station where I saw the CMA ad. I slowed down to catch my breath. I looked at the big tv screen that was above the roof of the bus station. This was where I first saw them. Country singers. Florida Georgia Line.

"Hey, Darlene!" a voice called. I glanced over, and saw Akemi panting heavily like she had been running a mile race trying to catch up to me.

"What are you doing here?" I said. "Well, I thought you'd be at the station, so I decided to follow you," she explained. "Next time if you want to go for a run or whatever, just tell me."

The screen came to life, and the words Country Music Association's Newest Participants flashed past. "Omigod, I hope it'll accept us!" Akemi squealed. The participants scrolled down slowly on the screen. Luke Bryan, The Dixie Chicks, and Cole Swindell were all there, and of course, Florida Georgia Line, but no Tokyo Cowgirls.

I was starting to lose hope, when the announcer came on. "This years newest participant is..."

Fingers crossed, fingers crossed...

"Tokyo Cowgirls!"

Relief flooded my body, "That's us," I whispered to Akemi. "We made it."

When we arrived at the Bridgestone Arena, we went backstage to wait for our turn to perform. A man with a scruffy beard wearing a dark blue suit approached us and introduced himself. "Hi, I'm Luke Bryan," the announcer said. "I'll be your judge for this evening."

My heart was beating fast. I wondered if he could hear it. "Nice to meet you," I said breathlessly. "So how do we win?"

"By the ranking system," Luke Bryan answered. "Ranking?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "We decided to base the rank of the show's country artists on the audience's votes."

"So if you're near the top, it's a chance to get famous quickly," Akemi said.

"I suppose so, " Luke said. "Now, Tokyo Cowgirls. You're on second. Knock 'em dead!" He opened the door for the changing room.

"Second..." I said thoughtfully. "So that means we're one of the openers," Akemi pointed out.

"Oh well," I said. "The other singers have been in the CMA finals, after all. Remember, we're just starting out."

The changing room was filled with fellow country artists. We picked an unoccupied space to change into our performance outfits and tune our guitars.

"Are you nervous?" I said to my best friend.

"A little bit," said Akemi. "I'm sure you'll be fine," I said. "Just do your best."

"Tokyo Cowgirls, this way please!" called Luke Bryan. It was time. He led us backstage with all the other judges. Behind the curtains, we could hear the audience murmuring to each other. "Th-there's so many people," Akemi said.

"It's all good," I replied. We heard footsteps approaching. I looked back and gasped in surprise. It was Courtney Jones. I felt like an idiot for forgetting she was also taking part in the CMA awards with us. Courtney flashed a self-absorbed smile and tossed her orange hair back. "Good luck," she murmured before strutting away.

"Courtney Jones is about to take the stage. Enjoy the show," Luke Bryan announced.

I watched in amazement as Courtney confidently walked to the stage, looking elegant and stylish in her concert outfit.

She glanced over at me and did a smirk. Her purple eyes flared.

She grabbed the microphone and began her speech.

"Thank you so much, everyone!" she exclaimed. "I truly appreciate your support in my journey to become a country singer. Your encouragement means the world to me!"

Yeah, right. It seemed like she would act like she's so happy and polite, but then she would turn around and be the jerk that she always is.

"Let the show begin!" declared Courtney. The fiddles and the guitars began from the band.

"O'er here in the countryside, I was raised by parents who never let me go," she sang.

Dang, her voice was beautiful. If only her personality was, too. When it got to chorus, I hate to admit it, but I was belting out the song with the rest of the audience.

As the song concluded, the audience erupted in applause and cheers. I was left in awe of her performance. Despite being a huge diva, she still possessed the talent to become an incredible country singer.

"See what being a country singer is all about?" Courtney shouted. "You'll never beat me!

"Now presenting Tokyo Cowgirls!" called Luke Bryan. I remained motionless, as if my feet were firmly cemented to the floor.

"Darlene," Akemi prompted, bringing me back to the moment. Suddenly, it all came flooding back. With my guitar secured to my chest, we made our way to the main stage.

**Tough Times**

The steam hissed around the wheels of the train, a mournful sound that mirrored the bittersweet feeling clinging to us. We stood shoulder to shoulder, Akemi and I, pressed against the grime-streaked window of the Nashville train station, the bright lights of the city blurring into hazy halos in the twilight. Inside, the warmth of the waiting room was a small comfort against the chill that had settled deep in our bones. We were still buzzing, vibrating with the energy of the concert we'd just poured our hearts into.

For months, we'd been working tirelessly, honing our harmonies, polishing our performances. We had dreamt of this moment, pictured ourselves bathed in the spotlight, accepting the metaphorical (and hopefully literal) laurel wreaths of victory. But the laurel wreaths remained unclaimed by us. The announcements had echoed through the Ryman Auditorium, the names of the winners booming over the loudspeaker, names that belonged to other artists, other dreams realized. "Tokyo Cowgirls," our name, the name we'd poured our sweat and creativity into, wasn't called. Neither was Courtney Jones.

Next to me, Akemi let out a small sigh that fogged the glass. I could see the disappointment etched on her face, the faint tremor in her hand as she clutched her guitar case. She was devastated, truly heartbroken. This competition had meant the world to her, a validation of her years of dedication and sacrifice. I understood her pain, I truly did.

And yet… something felt different within me. Despite the sting of rejection, the weight of unmet expectations, a quiet contentment settled in my heart. It was strange, almost paradoxical. For some reason, I couldn't shake the feeling that this performance, this particular night, was one of our best. Perhaps it was the energy of the crowd, the way they had responded to our songs, the goosebumps I felt on my own arms as we harmonized. Or maybe it was the sheer joy of sharing the stage with Akemi, of feeling the connection between us as we told our stories through music. I don't know why, I honestly couldn't

pinpoint the exact reason, but throughout the whole trip, and especially in that moment staring out at the train station, that's what I wholeheartedly thought. We had given it our all, we had sung our hearts out, and in some small, significant way, that felt like a victory in itself.

"Thirteen million people live in this city," I said grimly.

"Really," Akemi said. "Even after knowing that, I can't imagine it at all," I said. "I guess it must be different, living in a place like that," Akemi said. We stood in silence, gazing at the heap of buildings in the distance.

"I think we did our best," I said. "I feel like today's show was the best out of all our show's we did in the past. Our voices were strong and we had the fewest mistakes yet. Plus all the singers here were probably in the CMA, too. It's no wonder we didn't win."

"But if we want to get to the CMA championships, it means we have to be as good as the singers were today," Akemi pointed out.

"Well yeah, that's true."

"I realized it when I saw Courtney," Akemi said. "That's what top level country singers are like. We have to be as good as them, too. But even they didn't win. No matter how hard we practice, it's just not good enough."

I felt a small weight in my heart. Perhaps she was correct. Perhaps we didn't measure up. Still, I needed to maintain my composure. I wasn't ready to surrender, especially after everything we had been through.

"I don't think focusing on that stuff will help right now," I said, trying to lighten up the situation. "We came all the way to Nashville, so let's have some fun."

All of a sudden, my phone started ringing. "Hello, this is Darlene," I answered.

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"Sorry we had to call you back here," Luke Bryan said back at the Bridgestone Arena. "I forgot to give this to you." He thrusted a white folder at me. "What is it?" I said.

"So the winners were picked based on audience votes, right?" Luke said. "These are the results."

"Thanks," I said, taking it from him.

"To be honest, I wasn't really sure what to do," Luke said. "But we decided to hand them out to the groups that have participated, too."

He winked at me and left. There was nothing left to do but open the folder and take out the sheet of paper which showed our scores. We studied the paper carefully.

"Where's Tokyo Cowgirls?" Akemi said. "Let's see... oh, there's Courtney Jones."

"She was in 9th place. She almost won," I remarked. I switched over to the second sheet and nervously studied it.

My heart skipped a beat when I got to our votes. We had landed in 30th place. 30th place in all of the groups. And worst of all, we had gotten zero votes. Zero. Nada. Zip. Not even one person voted for us.

I was in disbelief. We had honed our singing skills, sharpened our guitar playing, and there was so much more we could have accomplished. A successful show was within our reach. Yet, it didn’t happen. It felt like complete defeat.

"I can't believe it," Akemi whispered. "Yeah," I whispered back. My lip quivered, and I slumped to the ground, tears pressing against my eyes.

As we walked towards the train station, we were approached by Courtney Jones, who glared at us, tears streaming down her face. The malice in her voice made her words cut like a knife. "Don't you dare treat the CMA like it's nothing!" she exclaimed. "It's... it's not a game!"

We exchanged glances, taken aback by what she had just said. Courtney bowed her head and hurried off.

During the train ride back to Monroe, there was little conversation between us. I rested my head against the window, lost in thought about the concert.

"She was crying," Akemi said, breaking the silence. "I guess it was hard for her, too."

"At least we did the best we could," I said. "We may have not won, but at least we did our best."

"Darlene?" she said. "I think you're being a little too optimistic."

"We'll do better next time," I said.

"Darlene..." Akemi began, but stopped.

We remained quiet for the rest of the journey home. A few hours later, the train pulled into Monroe. It felt great to be back in my hometown. I had enough of Nashville for one day. With a heavy heart hidden beneath a facade, I disembarked and found Annabelle waiting for me at the train station.

"Yo, Darlene!" she called out. "How was Nashville?"

"It was alright," I said, trying to stay positive. "We did the best we could."

"Did y'all sing your hearts out?"

"We sang with all our heart's content," I said.

"Welcome home, Akemi." A familiar voice said. Sora stood in front of her sister, her short dark hair tied up in a small ponytail.

"S-sis?" Akemi stammered. Sora smiled.

After briefly fidgeting with her fingers, Akemi suddenly burst into tears and threw herself into her sister's arms. Sora didn't seem surprised that her little sister was in distress. "You did your best," she whispered, stroking her pink hair. Akemi continued sobbing. She buried her face into her sister's chest. Tears filled my eyes, realizing what had happened. It was a genuine failure. No doubt about it.

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Sora led us to a serene spot by the river where we could have a conversation. She allowed Akemi to lay her head on her lap to help soothe her.

"So you guys didn't win, huh?" she asked. I nodded.

"That's very common these days.''

Her tone was comforting, but I was not ready to be comforted. She stroked Akemi's pink hair, trying to soothe her.

"The CMAs are very competitive nowadays. So it's even harder for people to win."

"Maybe that's why Courtney lost," I said. "She said not to treat the CMA like it's a game."

"That's true," Sora said. She looked up to the night sky as she spoke.

"I remember one country singer tried to sing at the CMA, but she sprained her ankle on the day of the performance. It was very hard for her."

"But our case was different, "I said. "We didn't get hurt. We just had a really bad performance."

"Your performance wasn't bad," Sora said. "Maybe you guys just need to improve your singing and guitar playing."

I thought about what Akemi had said after our performance. "But even though we practice and get better, I'm guessing that it's still not good enough," I said. Akemi looked up from her position, worried. "That's true, unfortunately," Sora said.

That night, the darkness of my bedroom seemed to amplify the anxieties that gnawed at me. I lay flat on my back, staring up at the familiar landscape of the ceiling – the subtle shadows, the faint cracks in the plaster – each detail etched in sharp relief against the inky blackness. My mind was a runaway train, hurtling back to our show in Nashville, a performance that had been haunting me for days.

Initially, fueled by the adrenaline of the stage and the fleeting cheers of the crowd, I had managed to convince myself that we had poured every ounce of energy, every drop of passion, into that performance. We'd given it our all, I'd told myself, truly believed it. But now, hours later, nestled in the solitude of my bed, the rose-tinted glasses had shattered, replaced by a stark and unsettling reality. I couldn't shake the feeling that it had been a total failure. Not just a minor setback, but a complete and utter disaster, echoing the sentiments of what I had been reading online and overhearing in hushed whispers. It felt like the audience had been lukewarm at best, the rankings scathing, and the audience responded with a cesspool of negativity.

The weight of that perceived failure pressed down on me, a suffocating blanket of doubt. A terrifying question began to form in the darkest corners of my mind, a question I had always vowed never to even entertain: Should I consider quitting my career as a country singer? The thought sent a jolt of fear through me, a chilling premonition of shattered dreams and unfulfilled potential.

But then, a fierce wave of defiance washed over me. Absolutely not; I wouldn't let this one setback define me. I couldn't, wouldn't, allow myself to appear weak, to be seen as someone who crumbled under pressure. To quit now would be to validate all the negativity, to confirm the whispers of doubt. And as anyone who truly knows me understands, I'm not someone who backs down easily. I've faced tougher challenges than this, overcoming steeper obstacles. This concert might have been a stumble, a misstep along the way, but it certainly wasn't the end. The fire was still burning, and the music, however faint, still echoed within me. I just needed to find a way to reignite that flame and fight my way back to the top.

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I must have fallen asleep, as the shadows in my bedroom began to fade. I sat up in bed and glanced out the window. The sky was lightening, although it wasn't quite dawn yet.

I decided to take an early-morning walk to the river to clear my head. Upon arrival, I paused for a moment, feeling the breeze tousling my hair. Then, I took a deep breath, sprinted toward the river, and plunged into the water.

It was murky beneath the surface, and I couldn't see anything—not even any fish. I wondered if there was ever any light below the water, allowing plants to undergo photosynthesis. To make sense of it all, I pondered whether we could ever make a comeback in the CMA.

Suddenly, I heard a voice from above. It was unintelligible, but I was startled and pushed myself up to the surface.

Akemi was standing at the riverbank. She appeared to be sleep-deprived, with dark circles under her eyes and her bright pink hair looking disheveled.

"What the heck were you doing?" she called.

"I was just seeing what was underwater," I explained. "What was there?" said Akemi.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing at all."

‘’Are you sure?’’

I half-laughed, and swam to the edge and joined Akemi on the shore.

"That's the reason I must keep pushing forward," I remarked. "It's zero right now. One day, it’ll turn into a one or a ten. Nothing will change until I keep searching."

I picked up a rock that had been washed ashore and traced its rough edges with my fingers. I clenched it tightly in my hand, letting the tension drain away from my body— but only for a second.

"How could I stop being a country singer now? We have so far to go. I must continue to strive beyond my limits to achieve my goal," I remarked, my voice breaking.  "Unfortunately, we didn't reach our objective today. We worked so hard on our singing, our guitar playing, and the music video. And it should have counted for something. We practiced so much together, you and me. We push ourselves every day, and I can’t understand why that’s not enough. I couldn't bear the thought of losing the CMA awards. I couldn't tolerate the idea of our talent going to waste. All I wanted was for us to shine, but look at where we ended up."

Right when I said that, I felt it coming. I had tried to hold it back all this time, but I knew it was coming. My shoulders tightened up, my chest caved in, and my mouth opened in a howl.

‘'I can’t believe our effort was for nothing!" I exclaimed, my voice thick with emotion. ‘‘For nothing!’’

Akemi drew back, shocked that my facade was breaking.

"All I want is to shine! I just want to be more than what I am! I'm tired of being normal, from having nothing, from feeling like a nobody!"

Tears streamed down my cheeks and dropped onto the rock I was holding. I buried my face in my hands and began to cry uncontrollably. I couldn’t stop it; it just flowed out. I figured this was the result of bottling up emotions for too long.

‘’It was so frustrating…’’ I sobbed quietly.

Then, I felt an arm wrap around me in a hug. "It's okay, Darlene," I heard Akemi whisper shakily. "I'm glad you're expressing your feelings. It's not good to hold it all inside."

With every sob, I let out a noise like tires squealing on a wet road. I was losing it. The whole time I cried, Akemi embraced me, every few minutes stroking my hair.

"If I start crying, I’ll just disappoint everyone, won’t I?" I burbled. "I’m the one who has to stay positive. I’m the one who started this country duo. No one wants to see me like this. No one at all. No one..."

Akemi let go of me. "Listen to me," she said. "It wasn't all because of you that we decided to become country singers. Take a look."

Through my tears, I saw Annabelle wave to us from her house as we were talking.

"We have always backed your dream of being a country singer," Akemi said. "Myself, Annabelle, Sora, and your father will keep supporting you."

Annabelle joined us at the river, along with Sora and my father.

"But--" I whispered. Akemi smiled. "I'm here for you. You can always share your feelings, because both of us in this together."

"Look, sweetie," Dad said. ‘’There’s no need to suppress your feelings when you're with others. Whenever you feel sad, angry, or anything else, just let it all out.’’

"We're all on your side, Darlene," Annabelle said. "And we ain't lettin' go."

"I hope you feel better," Sora said. "I support you."

I was so flooded with gratitude for all the support that I began to cry harder, realizing I had people standing by me. My friends and dad tried to lighten the mood with laughter, but I continued to weep.

Akemi put her arm around me. "I don't know what the future holds," she said. "But that's okay. I want to see Tokyo Cowgirls evolve over time. I want to find the shine with you. We all feel that way."

I took a quivering breath. Maybe she was right. I let out one final sniff. Somehow I felt lighter on my feet than I had in a while. Crying had left me feeling more at peace with myself, as if trouble and guilt had been washed away by tears. I felt like a new person who was ready to try again.

All of a sudden, the sun started to rise through the trees. It turned the woods into a lovely pink glow. I took a deep breath, wiped away the last of my tears, and smiled at my friends.

"Thank you so much, guys," I said, much stronger than I was before. "Y'all are the best."

Soon I calmed down and the five of us watched the sunrise from the river. From that day on, we had a new goal. Not just to shine above everybody else in the CMA awards. To turn the zero into a one. And then one into a ten. And then into a thousand. Together we would push through the limits and overcome the obstacles, to make our dream a reality. Getting famous definitely wasn't easy, but with my friends and family by my side, anything is possible.

**Confession**

The relentless sun beat down unrelentingly, its searing rays threatening to scorch us, casting a harsh, unyielding light over the landscape. The air lay heavy and stagnant, devoid of even the faintest whisper of a breeze, intensifying the suffocating heat that enveloped us. Breathing felt like a laborious task, the poor air quality a stark reminder of the sprawling forest fires raging on in the distant reaches of Canada, their acrid remnants permeating the atmosphere with an unmistakable sense of urgency and unease.

Amidst this oppressive environment, the simple act of practicing guitar became a daunting challenge, each strum of the strings seemingly amplified by the thick, heavy air that pressed in on us from all sides. The music, usually a source of solace and joy, struggled to rise above the weight of the heat and smoke-filled sky, creating a discordant melody that mirrored the discord in nature itself. With each note played, one couldn't help but feel the weight of the world bearing down, the distant rumble of the fires a constant reminder of the fragility of our existence in the face of such elemental forces.

"It's so hot!" Akemi complained. "There's no way..." Annabelle said exhaustedly.

"You have got to be kidding me!" I said. "Why can't we practice in this heat? The weather is still sunny and pleasant outside.’’

Akemi groaned and passed out on the stack of hay. Sora clapped her hands together to get our attention. "Enough complaining," she said. "You guys have a lot of work to do."

"While it's a hundred degrees?" Akemi moaned. "I don't think so."

"I have an idea!" I exclaimed. "Why don't we have a training trip?"

Akemi and Annabelle stared at me in confusion. "Where the heck did that come from?" Annabelle said. "I'm such a genius," I said. "Why didn't I think of this sooner?"

"A training trip, huh? Sounds *kawaii*," Akemi said happily. "Absolutely," Sora said. "Practicing in such intense heat can take its tolls."

"So where would y'all go?" asked Annabelle. "The beach," I answered. "I mean it is summer!"

"And how will we be paying for this?" said Sora. Oh, right. I forgot all about paying for our trip. Oh well. I turned to Akemi. "Hey, Akemi, when will you be getting paid?" I asked her.

"Darlene, you're not asking my sister to pay for this, are you?" Sora said.

"Um, not exactly," I said. "I just wanted to borrow a little from her."

An alternative thought crossed my mind. Sora and Akemi had considerable wealth, and it was possible they possessed a beach house. We could use it as our accommodation for the beach trip. I approached Sora with the idea. She seemed taken aback, while Akemi appeared quite enchanted by the suggestion.

"Come on, Sora. Pretty please with baked beans on top?' I ran up to her and threw my arms around her for good measure.

"Hey, wait a minute, get off!" Sora complained.

"She's right," Annabelle said. "We ain't gonna be botherin' her family like that."

I stared at Sora with my big pleading puppy dog eyes. "Please?"

She rolled her eyes, exasperated. "Alright, fine." she sighed. "I'll ask our parents. I'm sure we can go."

"Yippee!" I cried. A whole night spent hanging out at the Chiharu family's beach house! What could be better?

"But however," said Sora, "We're not going to play around at the beach. You guys will be practicing non stop from day to night. I'll make sure of that."

I groaned. Practicing, ugh!

‘'Don't be so hard on them," Annabelle said to Sora. "Maybe they can find a balance between and playing' and practicing'."

"I'll see what I can do," Sora said.

"We'll meet at my place at 7 AM," I said. "Then my dad can drive us to the train station."

Everyone agreed and left the barn except Akemi. Her thumb was drawn to her mouth and she looked worried.

"You good?" I said. "I'm fine." Akemi shrugged it off with a smile, but I wasn't so sure.

The next morning was the day of our training trip, only I had forgotten it completely. My phone's alarm volume was very low, so I slept through it. We would leave for the train at 8:00, so Sora had warned me not to oversleep. When I finally woke up, I looked at my alarm clock. It was 8:15.

"Crap!" I exclaimed.

After a hurried breakfast, Dad managed to drive me to the train station just in time before our train left. "Good grief," I gasped when I finally got on the train. "I can't believe I overslept!"

"Yea, and after we warned you not to sleep in, too," Sora said grumpily.

"Sorry," I said. "I was way too excited to get a good night sleep."

"What are you, a grade schooler?"

I giggled nervously. "Well, you're not the only one who's tired," Sora pointed out.

She gestured to Akemi, who was sound asleep next to Sora. "She's sleeping," I said. "Well she did say it was her dream."

Akemi giggled in her sleep. I decided that she was not really sleeping if she was able to laugh.

"I wonder what she's dreaming about," Sora said.

"I think we really need to get a picture of this," I said, fetching my phone from my backpack. "Wouldn't that be bullying?" said Sora.

"Not really. It's for our memory album," I remarked. Aiming my phone at Akemi, I snapped the picture. I then turned my phone around for Sora to see. "Wonderful," she commented.

Akemi stirred. "I'm so sorry," she mumbled.

"It's okay," I said. Akemi smiled sheepishly. "Anyways," I said.  "Tell me where this awesome vacation home is."

"Well..." Akemi said. Darkness flooded the train, and a fresh smell of saltwater filled my nose. "Almost there," she said.

Suddenly bright light flooded the inside. I heard seagulls crying. I looked out the window, and there it was!! The beach! The beach! The wonderful, glorious beach!

"Yes!" I said happily. The ocean was sparkling in the sunlight, making it a beautiful aqua blue, the color of Sora's eyes.

A seagull zipped past, its wings flapping vigorously, and disappeared into the sky to find some food.

"There it is." Sora said. "The beach."

Akemi reached for the window to pull it up. I did the same. We pushed open the window so we could let in the fresh sea breeze.

In the distance we saw a dolphin somersault out of the water and splash back down the sea. I loved dolphins. They were my second favorite animal after horses.

"Smell that fresh salty air!" I said. "Yay, swimming!" exclaimed Annabelle.

"I told you!" Sora shouted. " We didn't come here to play!"

We ignored her and focused on absorbing the glorious scenery. Sora groaned.

We arrived at the beach house shortly after I rented a car from the mechanic to drive us there. Surprisingly, Akemi's beach house was smaller than I expected. I thought it would be like a mansion, but it was more like a cottage.

"To be honest, I had hoped for us to stay in one of the larger vacation houses," Akemi explained. "But unfortunately we only got permission to borrow the smallest."

From the outside, it appeared quite tiny, but the interior told a completely different tale. The living room was enormous! It featured a television, a coffee table, bookshelves, and a large window offering a view of the beach. It was a far cry from my snug farmhouse in Monroe. Just think of the relaxation I'd enjoy here every summer!

We entered the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. A vibrant, glistening piece of raw steak awaited its moment on the grill. "Isn't it incredible?" Annabelle exclaimed. "I truly apologize," Akemi replied softly.

We hurried upstairs to discover more of the house. As we entered, we were greeted by a huge bedroom featuring a queen-sized bed! Above it hung a beautiful white canopy that draped gracefully. I thought to myself that when I became world-renowned, this would be my chosen retreat.

“I call dibs on this one!” I exclaimed, flinging myself onto the bed. It was incredibly soft—the most comfortable bed I had ever experienced. It felt like pure bliss. I rolled around, enjoying the gentle caress of its lightly Febreze-scented covers. Annabelle joined in, and together we frolicked happily like a pair of puppies.

Akemi came in. She looked surprised to see us on her bed, but happy to see us having fun. She brushed it off.  "I want to show you something, Darlene." she said. "Come on back downstairs."

Downstairs, I went past the kitchen to a door which led to her basement. I wondered what it would be like. It probably would have a pool table and a bunk bed like my cousin Tabitha's house did.

"Close your eyes," Akemi said to me. She took my hand and directed me down the stairs so I wouldn't bump into anything. A musty smell filled my nose as we slowly crept down the stairs together. The basement was dark. She led me further down and then soon halted. "Where are we going?" I said. "You'll see," Akemi said.

She flipped open a door and the light came back. "Come in," said Akemi. I opened my eyes. The room was large and had a lot of space to relax. There was a full size drum set, a few amplifiers, electric guitars, and a microphone stand.

There was also a desk with a huge monitor, a laptop, and a green record player. It looked just like a real recording studio. I envisioned myself practicing my guitar and writing music while looking out at the beautiful ocean. Imagine that kind of lifestyle!

"It hadn't been used recently, so I'm afraid the equipment won't be working properly," Akemi explained.

I inspected one of the amplifiers thoughtfully. Everything looked fine to me. Once we plugged the guitars into the amplifier and turned on the microphones, we would be good to go.

"I don't see why it would be bad to practice here," I said. "The blue skies, the crashing waves, and the white sand make great practicing weather."

"You think?" Akemi said. "Of course!" I said happily. I unzipped my backpack and lugged out the boombox that I packed the night before the trip. Surprisingly, after years of being stored away in the basement, it still worked.

My dad kept it for me in my room when I was six years old. I remember playing it all the time whenever I drew pictures and played with my Barbies. But then, I started using it at night to fall asleep, and as a result, it kept my father up.

Dad eventually took it away and stored it in the basement closet so I would never find it again. But eleven years later, I had found it again and decided to bring it along on the trip.

I'd put in a Florida Georgia Line CD and listened to it as I packed for our beach trip.

"What is that?" Akemi said, noticing the boombox. "Oh, you mean this?" I said. I pressed the play button. Akemi listened, nodding her head thoughtfully. "It's Florida Georgia Line," I said. "I've listened to them ever since I was little."

"Wow," she said. "You liked country music for a while, didn't you?"

"Yeah," I said. My heart sank, recalling our humiliating performance in Nashville. "You know, they're way better than we are," I said sadly. "I don't think we'll ever be as good as they are."

Akemi looked shocked. "I thought you were more optimistic than that," she said.

"I know, but..."

I glanced at the window and sadly sighed. "When I hear this, I feel the sudden urge not to be outdone by them," I said.

"Cheer up, Darlene," Akemi reassured me. "I'm sure we will shine just as bright as they are."

"Thanks," I said, smiling. Sometimes, a little pep talk from your band mate was all you needed to feel better.

Suddenly, Annabelle burst into the room. She was wearing a blue bikini and sunglasses. In her grasp was a blue and white beach ball, all fat and pumped with air, smelling softly of rubber. "Come on Darlene, the ocean is waiting," she called. "Hurry up and get changed."

"Coming," I said. I turned to Akemi. "Come on, shall we?"

"Aren't we supposed to practice?" Akemi said. I smiled. ‘’We came all this way, so we may as well enjoy ourselves while we're here."

"But I'd thought we would..."

"Come on, let's go with them," I said.

I ran back upstairs to the bathroom to change into my swimsuit. Akemi reluctantly followed after me.

The ocean was calling my name as I sprinted across the hot sand towards the crashing waves along the shore. I threw off my red sun shirt, held my nose, and cannonballed into the ocean. The water was freezing, but I didn't care. It felt so good when it was a million degrees outside.

I emerged from the water and beckoned for Akemi to join in. Akemi was sitting on one of the beach chairs reading some *yuri* manga that she found while at one of the shops in Nashville. I was surprised. Akemi normally loved the ocean. She even said it was her dream.

"Aren't you coming?" I said. "In a minute," she answered. "This book's really good."

"Looks like she's goofing off," I heard Sora say. "Yeah, yeah, let it be," Akemi said.

I expected Sora to ask why Akemi was not playing with us, but she kept silent.

We had spent almost the whole day playing around, and we completely forgot about practicing. Even Sora seemed to forget; she was busy helping me build the largest sandcastle and throwing a frisbee around.

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The sun dipped into the ocean, leaving behind a radiant pool of gold reflecting off the ocean. The day folded into the colors of the sunset, like a poem coming to a quiet end. Listening to the waves crash against the shore made me feel calm and at peace.

Akemi and I were perched on the sand with our legs stretched out in front of us so the waves could lick our feet. As we watched the beautiful day come to an end, I thought about the CMA regional preliminaries that were going to be announced soon. Hopefully we would win.

"It's beautiful," Akemi murmured softly. I agreed. "The day's not over yet," Sora said. Her hands were grasped around a large watermelon. Her hands were shaking from holding the round thing for too long.

"We're here at the beach, and if we don't live it up, what was the point of coming?" Sora's tone was excited, but she had a distracted look in her eyes.

"Um, sis?" Akemi said. "You forgot something." Sora stood there, her feet planted to the ground like the stump of a tree. Then she let out a gasp.

"Holy crap!" she cried. "I forgot about practicing!"

She then glared at me. "It's all your fault, Darlene!" she scolded. "For you going on and on about goofing off!"

"How is it my fault?" I said. "I just want to have fun while we were on this training trip!"

"I have an idea," Annabelle said, trying to smooth things over. "How about we have dinner and then we can practice before we take our showers. That way we won't practice on an empty stomach."

Back in the beach house, I cooked us a delicious dinner of Southern stir fry and corn on the cob. I was an excellent cook and Southern stir fry was a staple in my house. We had it for dinner almost everyday. It was my comfort food, and I made it very well. Just fry up some black eyed peas, Cajun rice, and corn, and wa-la. Instant deliciousness.

After we had eaten and washed the dishes, I passed out on the couch, exhausted from today. I hoped Sora wouldn't remind us we had to practice. I didn't feel like practicing. Practicing could wait until tomorrow. Or another day. Or never.

"Lying down after eating is a good way to gain weight, ya know," said Sora. "Geez, would you stop talking like my dad, Sora?" I mumbled.

Annabelle looked around the room. "Hey, where's Akemi?" she said. "I dunno," I said. "Somewhere?"

"How about you go look for her?" Sora suggested. "Why me?" I complained. "I'm tired!"

"Just shut up and do it," Sora demanded.

Reluctantly, I wandered back outside and found Akemi on the porch. She was on the phone with someone, speaking very urgently.

"A trip to Tokyo? I don't know if I should go," she was saying. "The CMA prelims is on the same day. I haven't talked to Darlene about it yet."

That night, while everyone else was asleep, I looked up the Tokyo website on my phone to get evidence. Akemi was right. Her trip was the same day as the CMA prelims. A wave of fear washed over me. I wanted my best friend to be happy, but I also wanted to try again at the CMA awards. I couldn't choose between the two.

I lifted up my blanket to peer at Akemi, who was sound asleep. I tapped her on her shoulder to wake her up.

"Darlene?" Akemi whispered sleepily. "What is it?"

"I found out that you're going to Tokyo," I whispered back.

We went outside on the beach so we could have a private conversation. The waves crashing and the cool sea breeze made a very relaxing atmosphere. I closed my eyes, inhaling the scent of wildflowers in the distance. "You found out, didn't you?" Akemi said. I nodded.

"Don't worry about it," Akemi said. "I'm going to the CMA."

I stared at her like she was nuts. Akemi gazed at the ocean as she spoke.

"I wasn't sure what to do when my family told me about it. I felt if I got another chance, maybe I'd give it a shot. But once summer came and I was hanging out with you, everything changed. Your ranch,  all our friends, being a country singer... Ever since we started our country duo, it's all been a big part of my life. I'm having so much fun with you in Tokyo Cowgirls. I then asked myself, which is more important?"

She smiled. "It wasn't so hard to answer. This is where I want to be right now."

"Akemi..." I said. I just had to get it out. "I want you to go to Tokyo with your family."

Akemi stared at me, shocked. My lip quivered. "I know it's crazy for me to say this. But I'm the one who invited you to be a country singer."

"You don't want me along?" Akemi said. She sounded genuinely hurt, and I felt bad. "That's not true," I said. "Of course I want you there! It's just that..."

I was struggling to hold it together as I voiced my thoughts to my friend. "I remembered when I first met you. Back then, when I was thinking that if we worked at being country singers together, something inside you would change, and that it would be great to shine as a country singer even if you're Japanese. I thought that'd be nice."

"But.." Akemi whispered shakily. I smiled and held out my hand. "I know you care about our town, my ranch, and our friends. I do, too. But I know you care about your home country even more."

Akemi was misty eyed, just hearing my words. "I'll be waiting. I won't go anywhere. We'll all be waiting right here. I promise. So make your decision --"

She suddenly jumped up and wrapped her arms around me tightly. I started to pull away, but she held me close like a teddy bear, making it difficult to escape her grip.

"Y-you're such a weirdo," she sobbed. I was so happy that I burbled up with sobs, too.

I had never told anyone that I liked girls, let alone confess to one of them. But while in Akemi's arms that morning, as the sun rose above the horizon, Akemi's warm body, her strawberry-kiwi smell, her pink hair brushing against my face, everything felt like home to me. Like she belonged there. Forever.

We stayed like that, our tears mixing together.

Then we pulled back and held hands --- her beautiful strong hands -- as the sun made its way above the horizon to brighten up the day.

"I love you."

That faint whisper, it escaped from my lips without planning. It was easier to say it than I ever imagined.

Akemi's widening smile was beautiful.

**True Feelings**

I never anticipated that confessing my love to Akemi on the beach would spark such jealousy in Annabelle. After all, I had been friends with Akemi for a longer period than I had with Annabelle. I vividly remember when we were both eight; while Akemi and I were playing hide and seek, I noticed Annabelle sitting alone by a tree. Thinking she was feeling left out, I approached her and invited her to join us. She accepted, and that was how our friendship trio began.

It all took place in Monroe, where I drove to the airport to say goodbye to Akemi's family, who were departing for Tokyo that day. Sadly, Sora couldn’t accompany Akemi because she had to fulfill her responsibilities as the vocal coach for Tokyo Cowgirls.

The airport was lively, filled with travelers checking their tickets, waiting for flights, and grabbing coffee from the nearby Starbucks.

Akemi looked stunning in her yellow sundress paired with a pink cardigan. She resembled a character straight out of an anime in Tokyo. "Please do your best," I told her. "You too," she replied.

Mrs. Chiharu glanced at her watch. "It's about time for us to go," she said.

Akemi and her mother waved and started to walk towards the line to scan her suitcases.A slight pang of sadness weighed me down as I thought about the CMA prelims that were in a few days. It would just be me performing, since Akemi was going to be in Tokyo.

"Hey, Akemi?" I called. "Next time we're on stage, let's sing together, ok?"

Akemi smiled. "I can’t wait!"

She quickly dashed toward the airport terminal to catch her flight. Once she was gone, I sighed sadly. I was not going to see her again for a few days, so the rest of the work was on me.

Back in my room, while Dixie was asleep on her dog bed, I looked up our ranking on the Country Music Association website on my laptop.

When it revealed our progress, my heart sank a little. It was the same as before. We had not gone up a single inch. I sighed and closed off the page. "Any progress?" Annabelle said.

"No," I said. "Not really."

I went on YouTube to check Courtney's progress. Her latest music video got up to 6 million views and 8 billion likes. Annabelle and Sora leaned forward to watch the video with me. Annabelle squinted at the screen thoughtfully.

"Who is that?" she said. "It's Courtney Jones." I said. "She took first in the CMA qualifiers."

"So that's the fellow singer that y'all met in Nashville," Annabelle said. I watched Courtney perform some more. She was doing great.

"I know how you feel," Sora said, interrupting my thoughts. "But what's important to you guys is the CMA qualifiers. How about you and Akemi focus on that for now?"

"That's very responsible of you to say," Annabelle said to Sora. "Well it's only because I learned a lot from a person like you," Sora replied.

I glanced at my guitar that was sitting in the corner, untouched. Practicing wasn't particularly enjoyable when you were the sole member of Tokyo Cowgirls.

I thought about Akemi, who was off with her family in Tokyo. What was she doing, anyway? Unpacking? Eating? Sleeping? I realized that Japan had a different time zone than America.

"Why don't you do guitar practice here?" Sora suggested.

"Right now?" I said, surprised. "Of course," she said."The CMA prelims are coming up soon. It won't wait for you."

The guitar was cradled in my arms, but I didn't play it right away. I gingerly stroked its smooth, wooden texture with my finger. Sora looked at me eagerly, but then read my mind.

"Without Akemi it might make your singing seem off," she remarked.

"Maybe we should get someone to fill in for her," I said. Maybe that would be a great idea.

Whenever I would pass by Annabelle's house I would often hear her singing covers of our songs that we had performed in the past at the CMA. Annabelle was awesome at the guitar just like me. She could have joined our duo if she wanted to.

I tapped on Sora and pointed at Annabelle. Our eyes were fixated on her, waiting for her to accept our offer. Annabelle drew back nervously.

"Why are you starin' at me?"

We kept gazing at her, anticipating her response. "Wait, y’all want me to fill for Akemi?"

We nodded.

Annabelle eventually accepted, and after she went home to get her guitar, we went to the barn for guitar practice.

Sora counted us in, and we practiced some scales to warm up. I soon realized that practicing guitar with Annabelle was way different then practicing guitar with Akemi. Annabelle had never been in our group before, so she didn't know a lot about our style of playing. We messed up a lot, like ten times. Sora would always scold us when we would botch up our chords. Sometimes she didn't know the meaning that nobody's perfect.

I got distracted, and I messed up my C chord. I didn't mean too, my mind just had a habit of drifting off when it was most important.

"It's the tenth time you messed up," Sora reminded me. "Sorry, Darlene," Annabelle said. "It's my fault. I'm always late every time."

"You're good," I reassured her. "I always mess up the chords."

"Let's try again," Sora said. "One, two, three, four." We started strumming again. Everything was going smoothly, until I hit the wrong chord.

It was about the millionth time I have done it. My fingers would always slide to another fret, and I could never control it.

"Sorry," I said. "It's okay," said Annabelle. "This time I was early."

My phone played a snippet of *Cruise* by Florida Georgia Line, a ringtone which I chose and downloaded for myself. I reached for my phone.

"Hey there," Akemi said. "I just arrived at the hotel, so I thought I'd let you know."

"That's nice," I said quietly. "Yeah," Akemi said. "It was almost a waste to get there myself. Waiting for the flight was a nightmare."

I giggled. I was glad Akemi was doing well. "Hold on," I said. "I'll get everybody else on the phone, too." I then pointed my phone at Sora.

"Sora, say hi," I said. "Oh. Hey," Sora said shyly. "How are you doing, sis?"

"I'm doing well, thanks," Akemi said. "Tokyo's very busy, but thanks for asking."

Annabelle looked left out, which shocked me. Annabelle was normally upbeat and witty, but it was different to see her unhappy. I held my phone in front of her. "Don't you wanna say hi?"

"Um, sure," Annabelle said. Before she could open her mouth, the low battery warning appeared on my phone, signaling me to end the call. "Sorry," I said to Akemi. "I have to go, my battery's dying."

"That's fine," Akemi said. "I'm going out to dinner right now, so I better get ready. Talk to you later."

I said goodbye, and hung up. She sounded happy, which made me feel good. Annabelle cupped her forehead with her palms and looked down. I got a bad feeling in my stomach. What could I have done to make her feel upset? I asked her what was wrong.

Annabelle uncupped her forehead. "N-no. I'm okay," she said. "Shall we resume practice tomorrow?"

"Sure," I said. "I'm going home," Annabelle said. "See ya." She then took off half-heartedly. I watched as she got smaller and smaller, and then disappeared. She seemed distracted for some reason. Was it something I said?

I tried to distract myself by cleaning the horse stables and feeding the horses. Taking care of horses always cheered me up. It was something about their fresh earthy smell and their soft manes that really relaxed me.

As I swept the walls and floor and disinfected the beddings, I thought about my horse farm that was in danger of shutting down.I couldn't imagine living in the strange, dirty city, away from my friends and hometown.

Sure, me and Akemi could video chat and all, but it wouldn't be the same as seeing each other almost everyday. Same thing for Annabelle, since she was my second best friend.

I checked the water supply, and noticed it was empty. "Stay here," I said to the horses, who were very thirsty. I went to the garden and filled up the bowls with water.

I watched the water splash into the bowls, making a rainbow in the late-afternoon sunlight. It reminded me of something. I couldn't think what.

I took the bowls back to the horses and watched them greedily lap at the water in their bowls. All of a sudden, I heard a knock at the door. I had taken less than three steps, before the knocking came again, louder and more urgent.

"I'm coming," I cried.

Annabelle's face was flushed, and she was breathing hard. She was sweaty from running all this way to my place. She had a bulging book bag strapped to her shoulder.

"Um, are you okay?" I asked. Annabelle felt my chest with her hand. "You're covered in sweat," she said. "What happened?"

"I was feeding the horses, and I had to get some water, and I ran to get some, so I got kinda sweaty," I explained. "You seem like you've been kind of concerned lately, so I'm happy you stopped by so we could work things out."

Annabelle hung her head in shame. "I'm such an idiot," she whispered. "Stupid Annabelle!" Tears streamed down her face, and she crumpled to the ground. I was shocked. Stupid Annabelle? What was her problem?

All of a sudden she jumped up and threw her arms around me tightly. Her grip was so tense that I was knocked to the ground. "Wait, Annabelle?" I said. "I'll get dirty! Let go!"

"Don't worry about it!" Annabelle sobbed. "What's wrong?" I said. "Why are you crying?"

"Don't worry about it!"

**Fly High**

Caroline, Mavis, and Brittney had plans to visit my horse farm for complimentary autographs and selfies, but they arrived late. I called Caroline that morning at 7:55, then again at 8:10 and 8:20, but they still hadn't left their houses on time.

A new message popped up in my inbox. It was for the winners of the CMA qualifiers. I motioned for my friends to come check it out. We scrolled through the rankings, anxious about our progress. I crossed my fingers that we would be higher than zero. The first thing we saw was The Dixie Chicks at the first ranking. My heart stopped. Have we lost? But then I scrolled some more, and realized that the groups were organized by entry number. I was relieved.

"Darlene, were you even lookin'?" Annabelle said. "I'm sorry," I said. I read all the names. There was Luke Bryan, Blake Shelton, Kane Brown, and right at number 4, was us — Tokyo Cowgirls. A huge smile crossed my face. We did it! We made it to the qualifiers!

"Annabelle, we did it!" I said happily. We held hands and spun around in the summer sunshine.

We decided to celebrate by ordering KFC and bringing it to Annabelle's place. For some reason, I was craving their bucket of fried chicken and mac and cheese, so I was glad I ordered it.

I sank my teeth into Colonel's Kentucky fried goodness. Mmm, I love fried chicken!

"Why are we eating KFC to celebrate?" Sora said. I swallowed. "It doesn't feel like a celebration when there's no fast food," I said.

"There must be something else, like sea urchin and rice," said Sora.

"Geez, you're such a sour puss," I said, and took another bite of chicken. All of a sudden, Annabelle came rushing into the barn with her laptop. She was dripping with sweat and was panting hard. "Look at this!" she said.

"What is this?" I said. "It's the number of plays in your music video," Annabelle said.

Our music video of our new song, *True Feelings* got up to 158,327 views in just one day. I was absolutely amazed. "That's awesome!" I exclaimed. "And that ain't all," Annabelle said. "It also got a lot of comments!"

I hoped Courtney wouldn't post a mean comment about our video again. I carefully read the comments and luckily, most of the comments were positive. Some said that they liked our costumes and our singing voices, while others liked the stage effects.

"I'm glad it was not a zero this time," I said.

"I reckon not," Annabelle said. "They made it to the qualifiers after all."

From the inside of my backpack, I could hear the faint ringtone of Florida Georgia Line's song *Cruise*. I unzipped my backpack and reached for my phone.

"Congratulations on making it to the qualifiers," Akemi said.

"Thanks," I said. "Let's sing as a duo next time," she said. "All together, for the CMA," I said. "Yep, two voices," said Akemi.

I told Akemi I would see her later, and hung up with a feeling of satisfaction. I looked at Annabelle and Sora, and we laughed together. "We'll get famous at the CMA," I said happily. "And keep my horse farm alive!"

"This should be good for the ranch's annual horse ridin' event," Annabelle said. "Horse riding event?" I said. "Yes," she said. "I heard it's going to be held in September."

Annabelle's dad was the cofounder of my horse farm, along with my dad, so they knew each other for a long time. I helped my dad take care of the horses, so I saw Annabelle's dad a lot.

"That's amazing!" I said. "After these qualifiers, my horse farm should be pretty well known."

Annabelle grinned and pulled out her phone from her pocket to check the CMA website. "Right," she said, scrolling on her phone. "Considering the number of views your video has, there should be a lot of people signin' up for the horse riding competition..."

Her voice trailed off. She stared at her phone with a shocked expression on her face. She was blinking hard.

"What happened, Annabelle?" I said. "Zero," Annabelle said. My heart stopped. "Zero?"

"It says zero right here," Annabelle said. Depression kicked in. It happened again. When were we ever going to succeed?

"Not one person signed up?" I said. "I'm sorry, Darlene," Annabelle said.

….

At Ben and Jerry's, I stared into my cup of my raspberry cheesecake flavored ice cream and stirred with my spoon. I didn't feel like eating. My hunger seemed to have gone down the drain, and normally I had a huge appetite.

"Zero...again," I whispered. "I wonder if the number of people will be signin' up will be different," Annabelle said. I shook my head sadly.

We received a lot of attention, and on our way back from the qualifiers, Caroline and her friends recognized us from Tokyo Cowgirls and requested autographs. When Mavis asked Akemi for a handshake, she ran off screaming, so I ended up shaking hands instead. Unlike me, who thrives in social situations, Akemi was extremely shy around unfamiliar faces.

"We were so popular!" I whined. "What will we do if we don't get new people to bring their horses?"

"That's just how it's meant to be," Annabelle said. "That shows how hard it is to be a country singer where y'all are."

"I guess," I said. "You still don't have any people signin' up," Annabelle said. "In Nashville, people will show up even if they don't do anything."

"Not here, though," I said. "We can't use that as an excuse."

"Darlene..."

I rose up from my chair abruptly, startling Annabelle. My sadness was replaced with anger. My heart began to pound.

"We knew that when Akemi and I decided to become country singers!" I said.

I picked up my half eaten cup of ice cream and wolfed down the remaining scoops, not caring about brain freeze. "Darlene, don't cram it down, or your head will hurt," Annabelle said.

I put down my empty cup and started to run to my car. "I'm going to think things over with myself," I called out.

Suddenly, a sharp, throbbing pain spread to the outer edges of my skull. I knew I shouldn't have eaten the ice cream too fast. Holding my head in my hands, I bolted to my car, started the engine, and drove away, leaving Annabelle standing there by herself.

That evening, I lay on the floor in my room, thinking about all that happened today. It was funny how my mood could go from happy that we passed the qualifiers to disappointed that we got zero people signing up for the event.

In the middle of my racing thoughts I glanced at the Florida Georgia Line poster that I hung up on my bedroom wall. My mind flashed back to the day when Akemi and I went to that concert back in Nashville.

I remembered back then, I thought they weren't that different from me. They were just two normal country boys trying hard and making their dreams come true, and I thought "Hey, maybe I can do it, too." Now that we made it this far, I wondered, what was it that made them different? Maybe it was the lead singer. Or maybe it was something else.

I heard a knock on my door. "You can come in," I said. My dad's jeans were muddy from all the work he was doing with the horses. He smiled kindly, but he had a distracted look in his eyes. "It's time for dinner, sweetie," he said.

I was full of fried chicken and ice cream, so I didn't feel like eating dinner. Plus, I was still torn up about our loss. "Dad, what am I supposed to do?" I whined.

"Tokyo Cowgirls lost again?" he said. I nodded. "I'm sure you can make it the next time," he said. "The road to success is not that easy, ya know? But I'm sure with your optimistic nature, you can make your dream come true."

I felt a little better because of his encouragement. He kissed me on my forehead. "Come down soon," he said. "It's chicken pot pie tonight."

I had an idea. Maybe we could go back to Nashville and we could figure out what made us different from Florida Georgia Line. Maybe it could give me ideas to improve our group. I reached for my phone.

"Nashville?" Akemi said over the phone. "Yes," I said. "I wanna find the difference between us and FGL. I want to see why Florida Georgia Line is so popular, and what was great about them. I want us to think about that."

"Why not?" Akemi said. "I can take a flight back to America and meet you at the train station so we can go to Nashville, but..."

"But what?" I said.

"Nothing," Akemi said. "Just let me know when you have the details. Okay?"

"Um, okay."

Akemi giggled. "See you soon, babe."

I lowered my phone and hit the *end call* button.

A week later, we had planned the second trip to Nashville. On the day of the trip, after a hurried breakfast, my dad drove me to the airport so I could meet Akemi so we could go to the train station. This was going

to be our third time we had gone to Nashville as a country duo, not counting the time we went in the very beginning.

The Nashville train station was lively with activity, filled with a white crowd once more. People arrived from various angles; some pushed strollers with their babies, others walked alongside their dogs, while some carried shopping bags.

"It's so lively!" I said. "Shall we go somewhere?" Akemi said. "Well, where are we actually going?" I said. "Tower? Tree? Hills?"

As we were talking, two white hot-looking men walked past us. One of them had long hair and a polo shirt, and the other had short hair with a beard and a plaid shirt. They both wore sunglasses. Once I recognized them, my heart began to beat fast. It was Tyler Hubbard and Brian Kelley! From Florida Georgia Line!

I was so awestruck that I felt a bit dizzy. I absolutely needed to capture their attention.

"Excuse me," I said. The long-haired guy turned around to face me. "Hey there," he said. "Are you a fan of mine?"

"Yes," I said. "You got a minute?"

Tyler and Brian brought us to their exclusive hotel for a private conversation. The hotel was quite charming, filled with the scents of fresh laundry and blooming flowers. I always appreciated spaces that had pleasant aromas.

In the living room, Tyler prepared some coffee with milk and donuts he purchased from Dunkin. I figured he wasn’t fond of Dunkin’s coffee, and I couldn’t fault him for that. Their coffee was pretty unpleasant. Starbucks was better.

"Your place is nice," Akemi said. "Congratulations on succeeding in the CMA," I said.

"No need to praise us," Tyler said. He took a sip of his coffee. "Your video has more views than us, after all."

"Oh no, it's nothing," I said. "But we're going to take the championship," Brian said. I was shocked.

Tyler took another gulp as he spoke. "Brian and I formed Florida Georgia Line when we met at college," he said. "We've thought about it, too. What makes us great from all the other country singers."

"Did you find the answer?" I asked. "No," Tyler answered. "You simply have to win."

"Y'all can't depend on other country singers to dictate how you win the CMA," Brian said. "You have to find your own way to shine."

"I guess that's true," I said half-heartedly. "Y'all have to win, follow their footsteps, and see what we saw," Tyler said.

I stood up. "But don't you guys want to win?" I asked. Brian and Tyler looked confused. "Do you wanna win the CMA?" I repeated.

"Tyler, is she an idiot?" Brian said. "If y'all wanna win, why are y'all entering the CMA awards?" Tyler inquired.

"Well..."

"Why did Florida Georgia Line enter the CMA?" Tyler said.

"Maybe because you're so good at performing?" I said. "Correct," he said.

"They should be posting this year's tournaments soon," Brian said thoughtfully. "You girls wanna take a look?"

We departed from the hotel and headed to the train station to observe the participants of this year's CMA tournament. A large crowd had gathered to watch the big TV screen, which was displaying the names of the individuals who would be participating this year. "The announcement is somewhat of a tradition here," Tyler remarked. I watched intently as the TV screen lit up with the words "CMA Final Stage." Shortly after, another message appeared: "Grand Ole Opry."

I whispered the words to myself in my head. It sounded pretty good. "It's really being held there..." Akemi whispered. "It's hard to imagine," I said.

We watched some more, mesmerized by the announcements. The Grand Ole Opry was where the best country singers performed if they passed the CMA preliminary qualifiers. I've always dreamed of sharing a stage with Florida Georgia Line ever since I was a young girl.

"What do you think?" Akemi said. "Have you found any clues?"

"Yeah, just a little one," I said. "How about you?"

"Yeah," Akemi said. "I'm glad. It's clear to me, now that I've come here."

I loved Florida Georgia Line with all my heart. Their music totally moved me, and turned me into the person I am now. I felt like giving Tyler and Brian a hug, but I decided I needed to be more formal with them.

I lowered my body into a bow to thank them. Akemi bowed, too. "Thank you so much!" we said together. The two country boys grinned. I felt happy. I was glad that I got to meet them in person and tell them how much I loved their music.

On the train ride home, I stared at my reflection in the window, thinking about our trip to Nashville. I looked out at the lovely view of mountains and rivers. It looked like a painting that an artist would do.

"So was there any point in us going to Nashville?" Akemi said. "I guess it's still not clear as to why Florida Georgia Line was so great," I said, "or what so different about them."

"What do you think we should do, Darlene?" she asked. "Me?" I said. "Well, I wanna save my horse farm. But I can't think the way those two from Florida Georgia Line do."

The train then stopped at the Monroe train station. Tyler's words came back to me: "You have to win, follow their footsteps, and see what we saw."

The words kept looping, a record that was definitely starting to skip. It was frustrating. I'd been trying to ignore that nagging little idea that we weren't good enough, but it just wouldn't go away. Maybe Tyler had a point, though. Maybe we hadn't been exactly… ourselves, lately. Maybe we were trying too hard to fit a mold that wasn't quite our size. I realized, hiding behind the successes of others, basking in their light instead of generating our own. Our group, our little unit, had become a pale imitation of what we envisioned. Doubt, a cold, creeping serpent, uncoiled in my stomach. Maybe we sort of… needed to figure things out for ourselves. Maybe we did have to find our own way to shine. It was kind of scary, but also… maybe also kind of exciting? I wasn't sure.

"How about we check out the river together?" I said. I happily stepped out of the train so I could take one last look at the river before we could go home. Akemi followed me out, unsure of my request.

The breeze rippled my hair as I looked out into the distance, watching the last glimmer of the day fade to black. "It's beautiful," Akemi said. I nodded in agreement.

We stood there in silence, soaking in the colors of the sunset. It was the landscape that an artist would love. "I'm starting to get it," I said, breaking the silence. "What was so great about Florida Georgia Line."

"Really?" said Akemi. "Yes," I said. "We can't compare ourselves to them. We can't chase after Florida Georgia Line, or the CMA."

"I think I'm starting to get it, too," she said. "Maybe Florida Georgia Line wasn't about being number one, or about beating other groups."

"Yeah," I said. "What was so great about FGL was that they ran straight through an empty place, a place with nothing. They were free... and true... and that's why they could fly! To shine like FGL, we can't be chasing after them. We have to follow our own path. We have to run freely, right?"

Akemi giggled. "I never knew you were this determined, Darlene," she said. "We can't let anything hold us back!" I continued. "We have to be true to our feelings, and put our hearts and minds to work!"

"Freely..." Akemi repeated. "Keep running fast...with our own legs..."

"Yes," I said. "What are you running towards?" asked Akemi. "I wanna turn the zero into a one," I said. "I don't want it to end up like before. That's where I want to be right now."

"Darlene..." Akemi said, amazed. She smiled. "Well, I want to do the same thing as you!" I happily ran towards Akemi, and wrapped my arms around her in a hug. "You're too close!" she exclaimed, but she was happy, too.

I pulled away, light headed. I made a fist and thrusted it out towards Akemi. She nodded and pressed her fist next to mine. Soon we were connected, our arms stretched from our fists like branches from a single root.

"Alright!" I said. "Let's go from zero to one! Let's shine with everything we got!"

"Tokyo Cowgirls!

“Yeehaw!” we exclaimed in unison, leaping into the air. It felt as if I were soaring into the sky, ascending higher and higher until the clouds brushed against my fingertips. From that height, the world appeared so small. That was where I dreamed of being—a big superstar.

*Dear Tyler Hubbard,*

*I love Florida Georgia Line. When I saw you and Brian Kelley on stage, two country boys shining so bright, I kept wondering how I could be like that and if I could become a country singer like you. I finally understand. I'm fine the way I am. I can look at my best friend, at all the things around me, and run on, straight ahead. That's what Florida Georgia Line is. That's what it means to shine. That's why I will find my own place. I'm not going to follow you. I'm going to run forward, in search of my own place. With everyone. Someday. Someday...*

**You Can Shine Too!**

Everything glistened in the sunlight—the trees, bushes, flowers, and the river shimmering in the distance. It was a stunning, warm day. Birds were singing, the sky displayed a rich shade of blue, and the horses were joyfully neighing and whinnying in the stable. It was the perfect day for practice, and that's precisely what Akemi and I were doing in the barn, guided by Annabelle and Sora. With the CMA regional qualifiers just around the corner, we were determined to put in extra effort during our training.

"You're doin' great girls," Annabelle said. "Just bring up your voice a little, Darlene."

"Sure," I said.

"And Akemi, lower your pitch a little bit. You gotta make sure you sing the low notes."

"Sure," Akemi responded. We practiced a little more, until Annabelle clapped her hands together, signaling us to take a break. I was glad to be able to rest my voice. My throat was hurting a little from singing the high notes.

"Here," Sora said. She held out two water bottles for us. "You promised you'd stay well-hydrated."

"Wow! Thanks, Sora!" I exclaimed, taking a water bottle from her. "No problem," she said. "Drink up."

I drank the water, feeling instantly re-energized. The water tasted cold and refreshing, perfect for my sore vocal chords. "Ahh," I sighed. "Much better."

I looked out at the field from the open door of the barn. The day was beautiful, even though it was boiling hot outside. The pasture sparkled in the sunlight, and the mountains loomed over in the distance. I loved the countryside, and I would hate to be separated from it.

"You shouldn't be out in the sun too long," Sora warned. "You'll tire out."

"But Darlene was born shining," Annabelle said. I giggled, and lifted my water bottle towards me. I loved summer. Things were really starting to heat up.

I took a long, cool swig of my water. Akemi did the same. "Alright. Let's get back to practicing!" I said. "Wrong!" said Sora. "Overworking ourselves is against the rules."

"Oh, okay," I said, startled. "The hottest part of the summer is coming up soon," Akemi said.

"The regional qualifiers are coming up soon for you girls, so I understand the urgency," Sora affirmed. "But taking a break from singing is part of the rules!"

"That's my sissy!" Akemi exclaimed, high fiving her sister.

The day was too hot to practice much longer, so we went back inside my house to cool off. The air conditioning was heavenly after the sticky warmth outside. It made me feel so relaxed that I could easily drift off to sleep with the refreshing breeze enveloping me.

"I wish the stables had air conditioning," I said. "They wouldn't bother combining them in a horse farm that might shut down," Akemi said.

"That's true," I said. "What's up with the applicants for the horse riding show?" I asked Annabelle.

"I overheard my dad talking on the phone with your dad," she answered. "He said that not a lot of people applied to participate. So it may be official soon."

Akemi lowered her head. "That's so sad," she said quietly. "I know," I said. "People should come. Even just a few."

My door opened. Caroline, Mavis, and Brittney came in, looking confused. "What are you guys talking about?" Caroline said.

"Caroline?" I said, shocked. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We came to your horse farm to borrow one of the horses to go for a ride," Mavis said. "You guys are practicing today, too?" Brittney said. "Your vocal cords must be suffering, poor thing."

"Yeah," I said. "The regional qualifiers are coming up. We practice everyday, so we're used to it."

"Everyday?" Mavis said. "It's summer!"

"And you've been practicing everyday?" asked Brittney.

"Yep!" I said. Sora appeared at the door. "It's time to start again."

"Oh, right," I said. "I'll see you guys later," I said to the girls. I started to follow after Sora. The three girls waved to me as I left.

We had practiced all day, and boy were we exhausted! My throat hurt from singing, and I had almost lost my voice. The day was just about to come to a close, and twilight was just about approaching.

"Phew," I said. "Another day of hard practice!"

"But I think we're getting better everyday," Akemi said. Sora turned to me. "How's the song coming along, Darlene?"

"It's alright," I said. "Almost done with it."

"Darlene and I are going to iron out the lyrics," Akemi said. "I really hope we can make our audience's hearts shine!"

"Me too," I said.

"Anyway for now, y'all rest for a bit and get ready for the big day tomorrow," Annabelle said.

"Sure," I said. I turned my face to the almost-night sky. Tomorrow. CMA. Concert. The words whirled around like a tornado in my mind.

A voice broke the silence and brought me back to reality. "Darlene!" Caroline and her friends stood waving at us to get our attention. "Caroline?" I said. "I thought you guys went home."

"Yeah but..." Caroline fiddled with her fingers. "We were like, kind of curious..."

Huh? What the heck was she talking about?

"You guys have been practicing for all of summer, right?" Mavis said. "Yes, that's correct," I said.

"We were wondering if being a country singer is all that fun," Brittney said. "We thought we might become country singers or something, too..." She lowered her voice dramatically and finished: "To save your ranch."

"Actually, a lot of people are thinking, maybe there's a way that we can help you shine as well," Caroline said.

"You think so?" Akemi said.

"Yeah. Your horse farm might shut down, right?" Brittney said. "At first, everyone thought that there was nothing we could do, but everyone really likes the horses."

"That's why you're not the only ones who want to save it," Caroline said. "We want to sparkle and shine, too. We thought there might be something we can do as well."

My bottom lip quivered. There would be no way that I would start crying in front of them. I want to stay strong but...

Oh forget it. I lowered my head, and tears plopped onto my shirt. "What do you think?" Mavis said. I lifted up my head.

"Let's do it!" I said. "Everyone, together!"

"Really?" exclaimed Brittney. "That's amazing!"

"*Kawaii!*" Akemi said. "I can't wait for the CMA!"

That evening, I made the decision to call Akemi. I couldn't manage to sleep since I was too excited about the CMA. I felt grateful for the strong support I received from my friends and family.

*Ring-ring-ring,* went my phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey there," I said. "I wanted to tell you about our song."

"Our song?"

"Yes," I said. "The guitar solo might be impossible, but I thought if Caroline and the others sang with us on stage, they might make it on time."

"Can they do it?" Akemi said.

"Yeah. We'll sing together, and it'll go great! Then we'll be famous, and the horse farm will be saved."

"But Darlene..."

"I want to turn the zero into a one," I said. "When I was talking to Caroline today, I thought about why the income was so low. I mean everyone loves horses. They love the town, and they love the horse farm. That means this is a wonderful place, right?"

"It is," Akemi said.

"But the fact that it's still zero means that people don't understand that. It's not that I don't care about the CMA. I just want everyone to know that this is a wonderful place, and we shouldn't afford to lose it. And...I want to turn the zero into a one."

"Yeah," she said. "I understand how you feel."

The following day, we gathered all our belongings to head back to Nashville for the CMA performance. Departing from Monroe, we embraced an optimistic outlook. We were determined to shine and transform the zero into a one. We were set to perform at the CMA, following in our own footsteps. We took a tour bus to the CMA stadium, a half-hour drive from the bus station that was entirely worthwhile.

We perched on the edge of the fountain, eagerly awaiting Caroline and the others' arrival. I had sent Caroline a message asking her to meet us at the fountain, but I still hadn’t received a reply.

"Caroline and the others aren't there," Akemi said, sighing. "I'm pretty sure this is the place," I said, and continued staring at my phone, starting to lose hope.

Suddenly, a familiar voice called, breaking the silence."Darlene!"

I whirled around. "Ah, there they are!" I heard Mavis say. "Over here!"

Delighted, I ran towards them. "Guys!" I said happily. "You made it!"

"Sorry," Brittney said. "We got a little lost!"

"Where's everyone else?" said Akemi.

"Oh, about that," Caroline said. "Actually..."

"Oh well," I said. "It is summer after all. People should have their break."

"We kept telling them," Brittney said. "But they just wouldn't..."

She was suddenly interrupted by a massive group of people waving glow sticks. I recognized them immediately; they were the audience from the first concert! A smile spread across my face, and I couldn't help but laugh. They had managed to get everyone to join in after all!

"Everyone ready?" Caroline shouted. "Yeah!" The crowd shouted back.

"You surprised?" Mavis said. "Yes!" I said. "If we all sing together on stage, it's really going to sparkle!"

"I'm sorry!" a voice said. I turned around and saw my best friend looking rather dismayed. "Akemi?"

She shook her head sadly. "Actually, I looked it up, and there's a rule that says that only people who can sing are the ones who signed up before.

My heart sank. I should have known that.

"Oh no..." Brittney said sadly. "And they're not allowed to be near the stage, either," Akemi continued. "I should have said something sooner. I'm sorry, Caroline."

"It's okay," Caroline said. "It's not like we gave you any warning."

Mavis walked up to me and laid her hand on my shoulder. "We'll be cheering you on, Darlene," she said. "We'll be giving you stellar support from the audience!"

"We'll show them your country girl spirit!" Brittney said. "So let us hear a stellar song, okay?"

I nodded, took a deep breath, and started towards the stadium with Akemi.

In the changing room, there were a lot of other country singers getting ready, but I didn't see Courtney, thank goodness. Akemi swiped a dab of lip gloss onto her lips, and I ran my brush through my hair to smooth it out.

"To tell the truth, I still cannot believe it," I said. "Me either," said Akemi.

"The fact that we're even here now just blows my mind," I murmured. "It's like a dream," Akemi said. "It's weird....when I moved to America, I never thought that country music was so popular around here."

"It's because of the CMA, and FGL, and country music," I said. "And it's because of you, Akemi!"

"Darlene..."

"A lot of things are going to come our way," I continued. "I won't be happy. There will be a lot of difficult and hard things. But I want to enjoy it."

I ran to the back of the room and held out my arms like the wings of an airplane. "I want to enjoy it all, with my friends, with my family, and get through this together!" I said. "That's what it means to shine!"

Akemi smiled again. "Yeah, that's true."

"Shall we go out now?" I said. "Definitely!" Akemi said. "Alright!" I said, putting my hand on the door. "Here we go!" I flipped open the door, and the studio lights shined on me. The stage was calling my name!

"Howdy, everyone!" I called out to the audience on stage. "We're the Tokyo Cowgirls! We've got something we'd like to share today. And that is my horse farm, and our town."

The spotlight shined on me, signaling for us to start our speech. "Tokyo Cowgirls was born in Monroe, Georgia, a town where the mountains are so tall, and the sun shines so bright! It's small, and there aren't many people, but the pasture is green and sparkling! The people are very friendly!"

"My dad owns a small horse farm in the woods," I said, gesturing to my father in the audience. He winked at me and waved. "We started Tokyo Cowgirls here."

The spotlight then shone on Akemi, which meant it was her turn to speak. "We saw Florida Georgia Line in Nashville, and we wanted to be just like them," she said.

"We wanted to be like them, but..."

"Writing songs?!" we exclaimed together. "That's a big barrier!" The audience roared with laughter. My cheeks were pink with pleasure.

"But that's when we got an idea to write a song called Butterfly Fly High," Akemi said softly.

The spotlight shined back to me. "Our view counts grew to six, and we sang our first song," I explained "The power went out, but we had to keep singing."

"That's when we got invited to go to Nashville for our first CMA concert," Akemi said. "This is where we are singing!"

Tears filled my eyes, remembering what happened in Nashville a few months ago.

"But..." My voice hitched. "We ended up in last place. The number of people who voted for us: zero."

"Zero," Akemi repeated. I slumped to the ground and buried my face in my legs. But surprisingly, there were no tears. I refused to cry. Not when there were a billion people watching.

"The world of country music is a tough one," Akemi said. "It isn't easy."

She approached me and gently placed her hand on my back to comfort me.

"Are we giving up?" she whispered. I didn't answer. "Darlene?" she repeated. "Are we giving up?"

I noticed murmurs coming from the audience, likely out of concern for me. I gathered myself, with dry eyes.

"It was frustrating!" I shouted. "Really frustrating! Our ranking was zero! Of course that's frustrating! I was so frustrated!"

"That's when we found our new goal," Akemi said. "To turn the zero into a one."

"We don't want it to end in a zero," I said. "We'll just carry on," Akemi said. "We'll change that zero into a one," I said. "That's what we decided!"

"And so, we entered the qualifiers," Akemi said. "And passed with flying colors! But..."

"We still had a low income," I finished. "It clung to us again."

"We thought about it a lot," said Akemi. "How can we move forward? How can we change the zero into a one?"

"And we decided," I said. "That with our town, and the horse farm, and our friends, we could walk our own path, take whatever came our way, and enjoy it. That's what it means to shine."

"To shine is to enjoy life," Akemi said. "To turn the day's zero to one," I finished. The audience cheered. Some were sniffing back a couple tears. I guessed our speech was more emotional than I thought.

We decided that was enough of our speech. We were itching to begin our new song. I tapped on my mic stand to turn it on. I plucked the strings of my guitar to make sure it was in tune. Akemi did the same. Everything was ready.

"Okay, here we go!" I said. "Enjoy the show, Nashville!"

As we sang our hearts out, the stadium filled with an ocean of light from the glowsticks the audience used. It was absolutely beautiful.

Halfway through the performance, I ran towards the audience and waved fiercely at them.

"Come on, everyone!" I called. "Let's shine together!"

The audience belted out the lyrics to our song, and we did too. I felt like I was on top of the world. This feeling was the best.

What exactly did we make out of the zero? We chased something intangible, got lost, got scared, cried… We wanted to escape that zero. And where there should have been nothing, a light kept shining behind us. And our belief that the two of us could be something special, was fed from the shining light. That's where we came from. What Tokyo Cowgirls came from.

Together with my friends by my side, we were going to make our dream come true! With this shining light!

# *Part 2…*

**A New Beginning**

A white feather danced gracefully in the air, and I felt compelled to catch it. I extended my arm, attempting to brush against its delicate edges. I pondered… What does it truly take for individuals to shine? I had articulated it countless times during the concert, yet I still sought an answer.

The feather gained momentum and drifted further away from me. With my arm outstretched, I sprinted after it. The white feather was drawing nearer. I could almost grasp it, almost —

I abruptly awoke, feeling disoriented. What could that dream possibly signify? Was I nearing success? Dixie was right beside me on my bed when I came to. She barked loudly in my face, startling me so much that I screamed and tumbled off my bed, landing face-first. A sharp pain throbbed in my head from the impact with the floor. After a moment, I sluggishly got back up, made my way to my desk, and glanced at the time on my phone. It read 10:45, and the announcement for the second season had been at 10:30.

"Crap! I'm late!"

I quickly got dressed, grabbed a high-protein granola bar from the cupboard, and charged out the door. As I sprinted towards the horse stable, I could hear a little bit of the announcement by my dad. Faintly, but surely. "Good morning, horseback riders!" He was saying. "The second season starts today!"

I ran faster, not wanting to miss the great news. With a pounding heart beat, and my body sticky with sweat, I was able to make it to the horse stables just in time to hear the exciting announcement.

In the horse stable, I was met by Annabelle and a not-so-happy Sora. "You're late again," she grumbled. I scowled. "Not as late as you," I replied.

"Did you hear?" Akemi said, running up to me. "Your father just announced the next CMA competition!"

"No way!" I said happily. "Is this really true?"

"Just like the previous ones the final competition will be at the Grand Ole Opry!" Dad was saying.

"Grand Ole Opry..." I repeated. "Darlene!" Sora said. "What do you wanna do?" Akemi said. "I don't think y'all need to ask," Annabelle said, winking at me.

My breathing grew shaky. This was amazing! The Grand Ole Opry!

"Let's enter the CMA!" I said. "And...And we'll turn one into ten, and ten into a hundred! And we'll save the horse farm! And then..."

"And then?!" The crowd repeated. "And then, I think we'll find our own way to stand out!" I said. "I'm sure!"

After the exciting news, we went to the mall in Atlanta later in the day, to have a little time for ourselves. It was exhausting, because many people were running at us to receive autographs and selfies. Apparently Akemi and I were that famous as country singers in Monroe.

After the chaos cleared up, we were waiting for the bus to take us back to Monroe, but it was taking forever to come to us, since we were far away from Monroe.

"Oh, that's right," Akemi said, reading the bus service times poster. "The bus service stops running earlier in the fall."

"That's right," I said. "The sun sets sooner, so our practice times after work may become shorter."

"We need to be more serious about ensuring we have enough time for guitar practice," Sora said.

"Shall we start two hours earlier in the morning?" I said. Akemi didn't say anything. Sora seemed like she was thinking about my request.

"Then, it's decided!" I said. "That's too early!" Akemi said. "You were also told to come to my place a little earlier, right, Akemi?" I said.

"How'd you know that?" she exclaimed.

I smiled. Akemi's mom had spoken to my dad a lot about the CMAs. I remembered that she told me that when she was singing and playing her guitar in her room, her mom came in, and then she locked her mom out.

It seemed that Akemi was not fond of having people enter her room while she was singing. Since her mom was a social worker at the Monroe town hall, she was quite skilled at handling emotions.

"Wait...I wonder if the bus that goes this way from Atlanta is also late." I said. "There are people who're coming back from work, so..."

Then I realized something. Maybe we didn't have to practice at home. Maybe we could practice in Atlanta. We could pick a spot at Chastain Park to practice our guitars and it would all be good!

I told my idea to my friends, and they were all up for it. "We can ensure we have enough practice time that way," Akemi said. "I'm all for it!" Sora said happily.

"What do you think, Annabelle?" I said. I didn't hear a response, because Annabelle was away from the group, looking out the Alcove River in the distance. I thought I could see her body trembling, but her eyes were clear as glass. I got a bad feeling. Maybe there was something wrong with her. "Annabelle?"

Hearing her name, she turned around. "You good?" I said. "Sounds like a plan to me!" Annabelle said. She smiled, but she had a distracted look in her eyes.

"Then, it's decided!" Akemi said. "Let's find a place to practice together tomorrow."

I glanced at Annabelle, slightly concerned. I knew there was something up with her.

The bus eventually came and dropped us off back in Monroe. It was almost dark, and I knew I should probably get home. But I wanted to see the river one last time. I waved to Annabelle as the bus drove off.

I strolled towards the river, which extended far into the horizon. The sunset bathed the water in a hue of reddish pink. It sparkled in the dwindling light. Inhaling the fragrance of wildflowers, I felt the tension melt away. Nature never failed to soothe me.

I heard footsteps clomping on the dirt, and I saw Akemi standing behind me. I beckoned for her to join. Akemi nodded, and walked towards me. "It's beautiful."

"It is," I whispered.

We were silent for a moment, watching the last glimmer of the day fade to black.

"You know," I said, breaking the silence. "For a second — it was really only for a second -- but I think singing together with everyone at the prelims helped me understand what it means to shine."

"You really think so?" Akemi said. "Of course!" I said. "It may be just a little, but I'm sure we can shine! That's how I felt."

"Yeah, it seems tough, but..."

"That's what makes it so fun!" I said. We looked at each other and began to laugh.

I made the choice to visit Annabelle to see how she was doing. As my closest friend, I felt a sense of concern for her well-being and wanted to ensure she was alright. Although she appeared to be fine the last time we met, I still had my doubts. The thing about Annabelle was that she always seemed cheerful and playful, but I could detect a hint of worry in her eyes. It left me feeling perplexed.

I found her on the porch, talking on the phone with someone.

"But you'd promised me that you'd wait, Dad!" she was saying. "This is too sudden!"

I was confused. Wait for her for what? I saw her bottom lip quiver, and I knew for sure that she was not okay. She needed help.

She saw me, and her face broke into a smile. "Howdy, Darlene!" she said. "Thank you for waitin!"

"What happened?" I said.

"Sorry!" she said. "I'm not Southern like you!"

I rolled my eyes. "Something happened, right?" I said.

Annabelle looked startled. "What are you talking about?" She said, leaping up and hugging me.

"I'll sue you!" I said. She let go of me.

"Wait a sec," she said. I stared at her. What the heck was she talking about?

"I guess I have no choice," she said. "The truth is..."

"The truth is what?" I said.

"I gained a lil' weight lately, so I've been feelin' a little down," she said, but I was not going to fall for her lies. I felt her belly, checking for the slightest sign of weight gain. Of course, she was still the same Annabelle that I knew, slender and healthy, not a single pound gained.

"That's a lie," I said. "Your weight hasn't changed."

"How do you know?" Annabelle said. "I can tell. Besides, you wouldn't feel down over something petty like that," I said. "So what is it, Ann?"

She looked down at the ground and was silent.

"Annabelle?"

Hearing her name, her eyes became shiny with tears. Her bottom lip shook. She sniffled. "What...what do we do?"

She buried her face in my shirt and began to cry.

"Annabelle..." I whispered quietly. I didn't know what to do.

The next day, we were hanging out in the horse stables, having our group meeting. I was exhausted after I got home from Annabelle's, but I couldn't sleep because I was worried.

"Darlene, were you able to find a good place?" Akemi said. "No," I said. "It's pretty hard to find one."

"Your family also has a cottage, right, Sora?" I said. Not only did the Chiharu family have a beach house but they also had a cottage in the mountains. I had never visited their cottage, but I hoped that it would be just as awesome as the beach house.

"Well..." Sora scratched her beauty mark thoughtfully. "Yes, I do, but..."

"Our place is pretty far, so it may not work," Akemi said. Darn.

"Annabelle's place might be better," Akemi said. "It's too cramped," I said. Speaking of Annabelle, she was not in the horse stables. She has told me she had to make a quick phone call with her dad, but she has not returned since.

"Huh?" Akemi said. "Where did Annabelle go?"

"She wandered off a couple minutes ago," Sora said.

I wandered back in the house  and found Annabelle hanging up the landline phone in the living room. Her face was flushed.

"It can no longer be overturned," Annabelle whispered with tears in her eyes. "It just can't."

I felt bewildered. What was she referring to? Suddenly, a terrible thought struck me. Could she be talking about the horse riding competition? Perhaps something unfortunate had happened to it.

She suddenly hyperventilated. "No!" She shouted. "It can't be over!" She picked up the phone and dialed in a number. She then noticed me.

"Darlene..."

"Does Akemi know about this?" I said.

"How could I tell her?" Annabelle whispered.

"You've been acting suspicious for a while," I said. "Something must be up with you."

Sora, Annabelle, Akemi, and I ended up going to Chastain Park in downtown Atlanta to practice, because my Dad was cleaning out the barn. He had told us to practice somewhere else, so we chose Atlanta.

The park was alive with kids playing soccer, moms watching their children run around on the play structure, and high school kids skateboarding.

We were sitting on the bench, strumming our guitars aimlessly. We weren't even practicing a song, just fooling around with the strings.

"Have you talked with your parents about letting us borrow your cottage?" I asked Akemi.

"I didn't ask them yet," she said. "I'll ask them when I get home this evening."

"I can't wait for the horse riding competition," I said. "It's the only time of the year when we get to this thing."

"I can't wait either," Akemi said happily. Sora wasn't listening. She was watching Annabelle, who was looking rather despondent. Annabelle sniffled.

"Wait a second," Sora said to us. We stopped talking, startled. "There's something we want to tell you," Sora said. "Tell us?" Akemi asked.

"Yeah," Sora said. "You see... Annabelle?"

"You see," Annabelle said shakily. "The horse riding competition....is canceled."

My jaw dropped. Canceled? This couldn't be. "Canceled?" I said softly.

"What does that mean?" Akemi said.

"Exactly what you think," Sora said. "The horse riding competition is canceled, and your horse farm will stop letting people borrow the horses."

Disbelief washed over me. The horse riding competition, the one we had all been looking forward to, was canceled. The announcement swirled around me, refusing to be silenced. The implications were staggering: the horse farm's closure would mean a move to the city, far from my friends, my familiar town, and the horses I loved. This felt utterly devastating.

"No way..." Akemi said. "That's too sudden!"

"Akemi's right!" I said. "The new season has started!"

"Maybe in the eyes of a rancher," Sora said. "But your ranch started considering consolidation a few years ago. Annabelle did her best and kept convincing her dad not to do it until now."

"That's right," Annabelle said. "You know my dad is the co-founder of your horse farm."

"But we gotten more horses right?" Akemi said.

Sora continued, "Annabelle loves your horse farm. She loves this place. We could never know how hard she's tried in the shadows for you, Darlene. For everyone. And now she's telling us there's nothing we can do."

"But..." My voice cracked.

"Darlene," Annabelle said. She walked up to me and put her hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry."

The bus ride home was a silent one. Sora let Akemi rest her head on her lap as comfort, knowing she was sad too. I sat quietly, still torn up about the horse riding competition being canceled. If only we had won at the regional prelims that time, and we were able to make it to the nationals.

I wondered...if we could've changed the future. I wondered if the future would've been different. I thought back to the dream I had earlier in the day. The feather was even farther when I remembered it the last time. That was how far we were from fame.

I got home, and it was very dark out. I slowly walked past the river and into my house. I was greeted by the homey smell of simmering vegetables and meat. Beef stew for dinner.

"You're home late today," Dad said. He was busy stirring the cooking meat and veggies with a spoon. Usually I made dinner, but since I was late arriving home, my father did it for me. I didn't mind when my dad cooked. In fact,  I found his beef stew to taste better than mine.

"Yeah," I said. I was distracted by a poster that was hung up on the kitchen wall. It featured us, the Tokyo Cowgirls. It was the picture that someone took of the preliminary qualifiers concert. There were notes that said, "Go for the CMA," and "We're rooting for Tokyo Cowgirls!"

I put my hand out and touched it gently. It had a glossy feel to it. "You like it?" Dad said. "Your friend Caroline took the picture, and she printed it out on your website and brought it for you."

I nodded. It was nice to have my friends be supportive of our group, but people supporting us wasn't enough. I wanted to save my horse farm. I loved the countryside with all my heart. I was proud to be a country girl. I gave a long, shuddering sigh, the closest thing to crying but not actually crying.

"Darlene?" Dad said. "Are you sad about your horse farm?"

"Yes," I whispered. Without another word, I trudged upstairs to my room.

The next day, Dad gave an announcement to the people borrowing the horses in the stable that the horse riding competition was canceled and to take down all the fliers for the competition around town. Worst of all, it had been decided that the horse farm would be terminated and they would be sending the horses to a different ranch.

"To those of you who've been preparing for the competition, I'm very sorry," Dad said.

I visited the local park and pulled down a flyer, observing it gradually come loose from the pole. With a heavy heart, I tucked it into my pocket. I questioned whether there was truly nothing we could do. I wished to save my ranch, but my hope was fading. Goodbye, Monroe; hello, Atlanta.

That evening, Akemi found me sitting alone by the river. She ran over to join me, just like she did before the news was broken. "What a beautiful sunset," she whispered. I didn't say anything, too upset to say a word.

"How things turned out is, of course, unfortunate," Akemi said.

I nodded.

"But I'm glad that we worked so hard." She sat next to me on the grass. "Unlike Nashville, this is a small countryside town. And yet, we were able to come this far."

"Do you really think so?" I said. I blinked away the sudden tears that kept popping up in my eyes. "If that's the case, then... I despise you."

I regretted saying those words as soon as they came out of my mouth. I knew it was not Akemi's fault, but I was still upset.

Akemi gasped. "No, I didn't mean it like that!'’

She stood up and looked up at the sky. "I'm a Tokyo Cowgirls member too, you know," she said. "I'd thought I'd continue to sing together with you. But I'd never think that this is okay. Never...."

"Akemi..."

"I don't know what we should do," Akemi continued. "I just don't know." She sat back down and stared at the grass.

That night I lay awake thinking about all that happened today. Images flashed through my mind, performing at the prelims, the dream of me chasing the feather, and the support that we got from our friends. Annabelle's words came back to me. "The horse riding competition...is canceled."

The words that Akemi said also came back to me: "I don't know."

I tilted my head at the poster that Caroline had made for me. I had hung it up in my room for decoration. That all seemed like a long, long time ago.

The feather drifted upward into the sky, slipping away from my reach. It was gone, just like my hopes and dreams. I stood there, feeling a deep sadness as I watched it disappear into the dark night.

I woke up, and it was morning. Have I been dreaming this whole time? I pulled myself out of my bed and got dressed. I grabbed my backpack from my closet and ran downstairs.

I swung the door open and dashed out just as my dad was attempting to attach Dixie's leash for her morning walk.

"Bye, Dad!" I shouted.

"Where are you headed, Darlene?" he replied. Upon hearing this, Dixie managed to slip away from Dad and followed me. In a state of panic, he called out for Dixie to return.

With Dixie chasing after me, I ran across the pasture, my backpack pounding against me. I didn't even know where I was running to. It didn't matter.

I slowed to a stop at the river, panting heavily. I shouted at the top of my lungs, "I can do this!"

The whole neighborhood could've heard this. I wanted them to. I wanted the whole world to know I was trying so hard to save my horse farm, to become a country singer, and shine brightly upon all the country singers in America.

I would make a miracle happen no matter what. I brushed the sudden tears away that suddenly popped up out of nowhere. Until then, I would not cry. No one would have to see me as a crybaby anymore. I was never going to cry ever again!

"I knew you would come," a voice said. I turned around. "Sora?" I said, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't know," Sora said. "But look."

I turned around. Akemi, Annabelle, Caroline, Mavis, and Brittney were all there. Caroline waved happily. I waved back. "Everyone..." I whispered, the words rolling off my tongue.

"When I noticed, I was there," Akemi said. Annabelle turned around and winked at me. "We're on the same wavelength," she said.

I grinned wobbly. "I bet we don't wanna give up," I said. "I know Annabelle tried very hard all this time, but I haven't. Akemi and I haven't done anything yet."

"You're right," Akemi said. I continued, "We may be wasting our time, but I want us to try harder until the very end. I want us to struggle! I want to search for the shine that I glimpsed."

I lowered my voice for a dramatic effect and said, "I wanna find it."

"You never know when to give up, Darlene," Brittney said.

I smiled. "What do you think?" Everyone smiled back. "Why not?" Akemi said. "Why don't we struggle as hard as we can?"

"Yeah," Sora said. "If you guys are going to do it, how about you shoot for a miracle?"

"A miracle," I whispered. "A miracle," Akemi said. As we said it, the sun rose up into the sky, making its light sparkle. The river glistened in the sunlight, the pasture was greener than ever, and I heard the horses whinnying happily in the distance.

"It's beautiful," Mavis whispered. Without thinking, I charged towards the river and flung myself in. Akemi and Annabelle panicked, but I rose up unharmed. My wet hair clung to my neck. My clothes were soaked, but it was okay. I could change later.

"Let's struggle as hard as we can!" I said. "Let's give it all we've got! Let's shine together until the very end!"

**Mountain Lullaby**

"I'm sure things will work out okay, right?" I said. I was stretched out on my bed, consumed by worries about the future of my horse farm, while Akemi casually browsed through a yuri manga she picked up during her trip to Tokyo. I could never grasp why she was so infatuated with that romantic content.

"I don't know," Akemi said. "I heard from Annabelle that the income hasn't increased by an inch. If there aren't any people borrowing the horses, the horse farm can't go on."

The door thudded. "Feel free to enter," I replied. The door swung open, revealing a melancholic Annabelle. She crossed the room and settled beside me on my bed.

"What's going to happen?" I asked. Annabelle answered, "I'm sorry, but my dad said that no matter how many people are opposed to it, your horse farm won't survive without horseback riders."

"I guess that's the way it's going to be." I sighed sadly. Annabelle continued, "I asked him if he'd reconsider if we have more horseback riders. I also asked him how many horseback riders we'd need to recruit in order to keep your horse farm alive."

"How many?"

Annabelle took a deep breath. "A hundred," she said flatly.

"A hundred," I repeated.

Annabelle nodded. "He said if we had at least a hundred horseback riders by the end of the season, they'd hold a revival party for the next season."

"A hundred?" Akemi said. "We only have ten as of now."

I tried to look on the bright side of our situation. "But at least there's a chance now," I said. "It's not over yet."

"Darlene..."

"It doesn't matter whether it's possible or not right now," I continued. "We just have to do it!"

"Well, I reckon she's got a point," Annabelle said, brightening up. I went over and hugged Annabelle tightly. She looked startled, but she hugged me back.

"As long as there's a chance," I said, "let's have faith! Let's try hard for my horse farm and the CMA and find lots of potential people!"

Sora suddenly burst into the room, sweaty from running all the way to get to my house. "We're going on another training trip!" she shouted.

.....

The next day, I got up bright and early for Dad to drive me to the train station to go to Illinois, which was where Akemi and Sora's cottage was. As usual, the train station was so packed that it took nearly an hour for my train to arrive.

Once I arrived in Illinois, I met up with Sora and Annabelle at the train station. The sky held very few clouds, and the fall foliage looked like an artist's palette against the blue sky. The mountains loomed in the distance, looking like a giant licked ice cream cone.

I inhaled the spicy aroma of pine needles. Man, did it ever feel so good!

"Sora, you are a genius!" I said. "I can't believe you and your sister really have a cottage out here!"

"Um, thanks," Sora said modestly. "Anyways, remember, you guys came here to write songs, not play around."

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

Annabelle walked over and put her hand on Sora's shoulder. "Now, now, Sora," she said. "We mustn't be harsh on them."

Sora rolled her eyes. Annabelle then turned to us. "How about we head over to your cottage," she suggested. "It's a-gonna be a race against the clock this time around."

She slung her backpack over her shoulder and readjusted her baseball cap. "Now then! Let's get a move on!"

Sora started to follow her, but I stayed back. For some reason, I felt like we were forgetting something. I had texted Akemi last night to not oversleep before our trip, but in the morning when I woke up, I never got a message back from her.

Before Sora could beckon me to join Annabelle, another train pulled up to the train station. It rumbled along the tracks, then stopped right in front of us. Akemi stepped out, half awake and groggy. She rubbed her eyes and mumbled, "Where are we?"

"I told you not to sleep late!" I scolded her. "Didn't you read my text last night?"

"Well, it's not my fault that no one bothered to wake me up!" Akemi shouted back. We glared at each other, so different from us normally being best friends. We have never argued before, and Akemi hardly ever got this angry.

"Now, now, girls," Sora said, trying to break up the fight. "You're awake now, Akemi. So why don't we head on over to the cottage? After all, it was Darlene's idea." She winked at me.

We rented a car from the mechanic and drove to the cottage. It didn't take that long, only 15 minutes. We arrived at the cottage, which didn't even look like a cottage. It was a mansion, complete with lots of windows and a stone door.

There was an elephant fountain right next to it, and bushes surrounding the outside. Forget about the beach house. We could stay here for the summer, too!

"Y'all don't fail to impress, do ya?" Annabelle said.

On the outside it was even more impressive! There was a ceiling with a massive fan, and best of all, there was a real fireplace in the living room. My home never had that kind of luxury. I have always loved the smell of burning wood from fires since my childhood.

"This is awesome!" I said. "We can light the fire and have hot chocolate right next to it!"

"That's not going to happen," Sora said. "It's not even cold enough to build a fire. Besides, Daddy says that if the chimney's too dirty, Santa will have a hard time coming down and he will not be happy with us."

"Santa Claus?" Annabelle said. "That makes as much sense as a leopard without spots."

"You still believe in Santa?" I said. Sora nodded, and gestured to the fireplace so we could all take a look. I got down to my knees and poked my head through the fireplace. Inside were words printed in chalk that said *Thank you!*

There were also badly drawn pictures of snowmen with top hats and reindeer pulling sleds along. I stared at it, amazed. Sora wasn't kidding after all.

"I try my best to keep the chimney as clean as possible so that Santa will be happy coming down here during the winter," Sora said.

"That's my sissy!" Akemi exclaimed. She gave her sister a big hug, and Sora planted a kiss on her forehead.

Annabelle clapped her hands together to get our attention. "Alright, y'all," she said. "It's time for you to write a song."

"We'll start here," Sora said. She took my hand and led me out of the living room. Akemi followed after me. She guided us to a small room with a wooden bookshelf and a huge desk.

A flower pot with a tiny plant that stuck out sat on top of the desk as a display. It looked nice enough for writing songs. The window's blinds were open, and a pool of sunlight flooded the room.

"Akemi, you can write the lyrics here," Sora said. "I put dictionaries and poetry books on the shelves for you."

"Thanks a lot, sis," Akemi said. Sora smiled. She then led me to another room which looked like a recording studio. It was similar to the music studio room at the beach house. It had a giant monitor with two laptops surrounding it, and speakers nestled under the monitor.

In the corner, there were two electric guitars, a drum set, and a bass guitar all nestled in the corner of the room. There was also a bookshelf with music producing books and a CD player that had a BTS CD loaded in.

"You can program the music here," Sora said. "There are some books on how to use GarageBand and an MIDI machine."

"Thanks," I said.

"Well then," Sora said, "Annabelle and I will be downstairs. I'll make you guys some hot chocolate in a few minutes. If you need anything, we'll be right here."

She and Akemi left the room, leaving me alone in the music room. I sighed and went to the desk, started up the computer and signed into my account. I clicked on GarageBand and waited for it to load up. I started a fresh new project and waited for my creativeness to flow.

What should the song sound like? Creating a new song felt like opening a tap inside my mind through which my imagination flowed. I could feel the music ready to come out. It was a sort of pressure, like water in a pipe. I always thought I could program something wonderful, but what I actually created never quite matched what I had originally imagined.

I wondered if Akemi was having the same problem as me. Normally writing lyrics was my job, and Akemi had never written lyrics by herself before. Usually, she was the costume designer and music producer. I thought about the preliminaries that were coming up soon. We had to make it through the preliminaries, or else we wouldn't save my horse farm.

I heard the door creak. Akemi came in, looking worried. "I don't know what to write about," she said. "Are you having that same problem?"

"Alas, I am," I said. "I just can't seem to come up with a good melody for the song."

Akemi sighed. "The CMA is tough," she said. "They'll only accept songs that we never performed, not songs that were performed in past CMA events."

I sighed, too. "I know," I said. I thought for a moment.

"Maybe we should go outside," I said. "Fresh air might help."

"Good idea," Akemi agreed.

First we told Annabelle and Sora where we were going, and then went outside. The mountain air was fresh and clean, mixed with the spicy aroma of pine needles.

I was so exhausted that I lay down on the ground and motioned Akemi to do the same. I removed my watch and placed it on the grass beside me. It would have been uncomfortable to wear it on my wrist while I was enjoying the outdoors, which is why I decided to take it off. The mountains made a relaxing lullaby. Just feeling the cool fall breeze and hearing the rippling water made me want to fall asleep and never wake up.

I spread my arms out and sighed happily. The mountains unleashed so much spiritual power.

A shadow fell over. I looked up, and saw Sora towering over me. "Let's go," she said. "You said you would be out here for 5 minutes."

"Okay, coming," I said. I was not paying attention, because I was watching a squirrel look around for food, its tail flapping vigorously. When it turned to face me, it was grasping a silver watch in its paws. I gasped. That watch looked just like mine. I shouldn't have left it out where squirrels could take it.

"My watch!" I exclaimed. "That rat!"

"It's so cute!" Akemi said.

"This isn't the time for fawning over cute critters!" I said. I charged after the squirrel. When it saw that I was running after it, the squirrel screeched and scurried away from me with my watch in its paws.

The squirrel leaped over a fallen tree branch on the ground and ran off, leaving my watch on the ground.

I reached out my hand and extended it, trying to grab my watch that was lying on the other side. "I can't reach it!" I exclaimed, turning to Akemi. "Can you please help me?"

Akemi leaned forward and took hold of my hand, allowing me to gradually inch closer to my watch. I gritted my teeth and pulled harder, but it still felt out of reach. "I can't stretch any further!" Akemi complained.

"Just a little more..." I urged, coughing slightly. "Just a bit more..."

The watch was nearly within my grasp, tantalizingly close to my fingertips. I tugged with all my might, finally managing to touch it. As I attempted to pull it closer, Akemi lost her grip and was sent flying into the air, and I followed suit.

We landed on our feet and were suddenly sprinting down the mountain faster than we had ever run. We dashed past a startled squirrel that accidentally dropped the acorn it had been nibbling on.

"How long is this stupid slope?" I shouted. "I can't stop!" Akemi cried out. We fled by a bush, which puffed up leaves which blew into our faces.

In an instant, the only thing I could see was the clear blue sky. When I glanced down, I realized the ground had vanished! We had plunged off the cliff and were gliding through the air. Directly beneath us, a waterfall cascaded into a sparkling blue stream. We landed straight into it.

I remembered waking up, and we were back in the cottage. The smell of burning wood filled my nose. I sneezed. Not because of the wood, but because outside was slightly chilly. Akemi sneezed, too.

"Sheesh," Sora said. "I'm glad you girls are okay, but you shouldn't have wandered away from the cottage."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Look, y'all!" Annabelle said. "The fireplace is real!"

I sighed. "Can you at least pretend to be concerned?"

Sora left the living room and went to the kitchen. A few minutes later, she returned with a tray with red mugs filled with creamy, bubbling hot chocolate.

"Here," Sora said, handing me a mug.

"Thanks," I said. I raised the mug to my lips and sipped, feeling the hot liquid on my throat as I swallowed. A cozy warmth seeped over me. Maybe it was because of the blanket that was wrapped around me, or sitting very close to the fireplace.

"How did the lyrics go?" Annabelle asked.

"Not very well," I admitted. "I couldn't think of a good idea to how the melody should sound like or the lyrics."

"We're in a slump," Akemi said sadly.

Annabelle thought for a moment. "In other words, you're feeling more pressure than before?"

I nodded. "We're trying not to let it bother us, but..."

"Whenever I think about what we'll do if we don't make it through the preliminaries, it just distracts me," Akemi said. Annabelle and Sora looked at each other thoughtfully. "I reckon we shouldn't leave it all up to them," Annabelle said.

"You're right," Sora said. "With more responsibility, they're bound to feel more pressure."

"What if we help them write a song while exchanging ideas?" Annabelle said.

"I don't see why that's a bad idea," Sora said. "All four of us are here." Sora and Annabelle turned back to us.

"How about this?" Sora said. "Annabelle can help Akemi work on the lyrics, and I can help Darlene with the music production."

"I like that idea," I said. "Me too!" said Akemi.

Since we all liked the idea, we set up tents around the backyard so we could give each other space to work. Sora thought that if we didn't give each other space, there would be no point in splitting up.

"Can we really write a song like this?" I said. "Of course," Sora said. "Being out in nature is a great way for creativeness to spark."

I started to relax. Being in nature was very calming indeed.

"Let's make something to eat," Sora said. "And then we can create the music after."

That seemed like a good plan. Aside from the hot chocolate I had just a few minutes ago, I was still hungry. Likely because I haven't eaten anything all week. I followed Sora out of the tent and back into the cottage.

When nighttime finally approached, we made a bonfire by our tents so we could relax. Just listening to the pops and crackles relaxed me. "If we put out the fire, it'll be pitch black, right?" Sora said with tension in her voice.

"What do you mean?" I said. "Are you scared of the dark?"

"O-of course not," Sora stammered. "Just wait a sec..." She quickly crawled back into the tent and disappeared, the tent swallowing her up.

When she was gone, Akemi and I glanced at each other. I giggled. "I had no idea Sora was so afraid of the dark.''

"I can't believe my sister is scared of the dark at this age," Akemi said. "She's twenty."

She suddenly screamed out and started blowing on her stick repeatedly. Once her stick was cool again, she sighed in relief.

"Sheesh," I said. "Take a chill pill. I'm composing all the music for the preliminary qualifiers."

Akemi gasped. "What did you say?" she said. "You just said you're doing it for the preliminary qualifiers."

"So what?" I said. What was her problem with that? Akemi leaned back and flipped her hair. "I thought that might be it. We need to write a good song for the qualifiers, so that we can win."

I smiled at her and took her hand. "No matter what, songs are always for everyone," I said. She let go, shocked. "Why are you suddenly acting so high and mighty?"

"I'm the lead vocalist of Tokyo Cowgirls," I said. "It comes with the job."

Akemi sighed. She held out a cooked brown lump, hot and smoking. It looked good enough to eat. But still, I wasn't sure.

"What is this?" I said. "A roasted potato," Akemi said. "Who doesn't roast potatoes over an open fire?"

I carefully took it from her. The potato scalded my hands, leaving an angry red burn on my palm. I screamed out and quickly blew on it to cool it off. I broke it apart, letting the steam be free. I held it out to Akemi. "Here."

Akemi looked surprised. I stared at her in the eye, waiting for her to claim it. She understood, and carefully took it from me.

"Thanks," she said. "Let's dig in."

I raised the potato to my mouth and took a small bite. Surprisingly, it was good — crispy on the outside, soft and mealy on the inside.

"Is it good?" Akemi said with her mouth full. I nodded. I took another bite and another. Before I knew it, I had finished my potato completely.

I saw Sora peek her head out of our tent sleepily. "Is something wrong?"

"What did it taste like?" Akemi said. "Warm and toasty," I said. "Like a warm hug." We looked at each other and started laughing. Who would have thought that a late-night date could be so amusing? With the crackling fire and the crickets chirping, it made for the perfect date between two country girls. Sora smiled and went back into the tent.

....

Early morning sunlight shot straight into my eyes. I yawned and stretched. I didn't realize that I actually slept, even though we were on a training trip, not like when we were in Nashville for our performance. I looked to see if Sora and Akemi were there, but they were gone. I opened up the tent, and scanned around, looking to see where the others had gone.

I jogged through the woods, looking for the whereabouts of the others. All of a sudden, I heard loud panting. Sora bolted towards me, breathing hard. "D-Darlene?"

"What happened?" I said. "I woke up, and you guys were gone."

"I went back to the house to get the laptop so you could create the song, but you were asleep," Sora said. "So I decided to sleep in the bedroom."

Sora and I went back to the cottage to check on how the other girls were doing. When we got there, we poked our heads in the living room to see what was going on.

Annabelle was sound asleep on the couch, a river of drool trickling down her mouth. Her hair was disheveled. Akemi, holding her guitar close to her cheek, passed out, too.

I scoffed. "They're hopeless." Sora giggled quietly. "Shall we let them sleep?"

"I guess," I said. "But we'll start practicing as soon as they're up."

**Another Chance**

"What?!" Annabelle shouted into the phone, causing my heart to race. I feared there might be more troubling news. I noticed Annabelle's lip quiver as she gradually brought her phone down. "What's going on?" Akemi asked.

"As a matter of fact, the horse riding' competition will be postponed for a week," Annabelle whispered. My jaw dropped. For a week?!

"Then it'll be on the following Saturday?" I said. "Yes," Annabelle said. "I was told that we should postpone it for a week because it'll take time to reopen the road due to the rain."

"But all of days..." Akemi whispered. "What's wrong with that?" I said, being Miss Jovial Woman for once. "We can use that time to rehearse more so that we can perform better, right?"

Sora glanced at Akemi. "It seems she doesn't understand the situation."

Akemi nodded. She turned to me. "Here's a question," she said. "The CMA qualifiers will be held on..."

"The Saturday before the competition, right?" I said.

"But we received the news that the competition will be postponed for a week," Akemi pointed out. "And the date for the CMA qualifiers will not change."

Silence. "Now when are these two events going to be held?" Akemi said. "That's easy..." I began, but stopped. "Darlene?" Sora said. "You good?"

It took a moment for it to sink it, but then it came to me. It wouldn't work. The horse riding competition would be on the same day as the CMA ….qualifiers! What were we going to do?

Meanwhile, the CMA qualifiers would be taking place in the mountains in the rural part of Atlanta. According to the email, the Nashville Country Music Association had said that they'd be setting up a special stage for the event this time around. But the problem was, there was no bus or train that went all the way to Atlanta.

Akemi had suggested going to Atlanta and then switching trains there, and then catching another train to go to Nashville, but it got too complicated.

Out of the blue, I came up with the thought of taking a helicopter ride to Atlanta. While everyone else brushed it off as unexciting, I found the idea incredibly appealing. Since I had never been on a helicopter before, it promised to be an exciting adventure. I could easily picture myself soaring high above, gazing down at the miniature world below.

"That's our Darlene!" Sora said happily. "I forgot we could do that. I'll arrange the helicopter right away!"

She then stopped and glared at me. "Well," she said. "You actually think I can say that?"

"You can't?"

"Of course not! I told my dad that we'd get a hundred horseback riders by ourselves."

"You're stepping on the map, sis," Akemi pointed out. Sora noticed and carefully stepped off. "Anyway," she said. "Think of it as all or nothing!"

"That's right," Sora said. "There is no way for way for you guys to perform in both the ranch's horse riding competition and the CMA qualifiers."

Her eyes widened. "Unless..."

"Unless what?" Akemi and I said together.

"Yes," Sora said. "If you girls can sing at the qualifiers as the first performers, there's a bus after that. If you can catch that bus, you'll just barely make it the competition."

"Really?" I said.

Sora nodded. "But if you miss that bus, the next bus isn't for another three hours. In other words, if you aren't the first performers, it won't work."

"How do they decide the order?" Akemi asked.

Sora's eyes widened again. Her voice lowered dramatically as she said, "By a lottery."

There was a huge crowd of country artists waiting to win a million dollars from the lottery contest. On the big screen the words came to life: *CMA Lottery 2022.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jason Aldean waving to me. I waved back. "Welcome to the CMA Lottery," Luke Bryan announced. "A rep from each country singer will spin determine their fame's order!"

My mouth got dry. That was a huge responsibility.

"Who's gonna do it?" Akemi said.

I thought. "At a time like this, the lead vocalist should probably do it.."

Akemi cut me off and thrusted her phone toward me.

*Born on February 26th,*

*Today's Fortune, Super Bad luck.*

"What does that mean?" I said. "It means that the chance of winning for a Pisces is slim," Akemi said.

Great. How delightful. "Then how about you?"

"Me?" Akemi exclaimed. "No. I'm not good at these types of things..."

Frantic, I put my arms on her shoulders and jiggled her. "You got to, Akemi! You're an Aries. Aries girls have a higher chance of winning!"

Akemi chuckled nervously. "Well.. but is it really okay?"

"Well then..." Luke Bryan was saying. "Let's start the lottery!"

I took Akemi's hand. "You'll do great. I promise."

"Th-thanks," Akemi said. She let go and approached the stage with Luke. Once at the spotlight, she took a bow and introduced herself. "Howdy, everyone! It's your girl Akemi Chiharu from the Tokyo Cowgirls! Hope you wish me luck as I roll the dice starting...."

She gulped. "Now!" She swung at the dice and it spun around. The numbers on the screen flashed as the dice bounced around.

My hands were cold. I couldn't breathe. Would it be victory, or would it be defeat?

The numbers flashed some more, until it landed on 1. I felt a stab of relief. We had been in the lead, but in an instant, our joyful atmosphere shattered when the dice rolled a twenty-four. I hung my head, tears welling in my eyes.

At Starbucks, I took a half-hearted swig of my caramel Frappuccino. Then I sighed shakily. "What are we going to do?" I whined. "Number twenty four?! That's right in the middle of the event!"

"I'm sorry!" Akemi said. "I was too nervous to even think about winning!"

"It ain't your fault, Akemi," Annabelle said, taking a bite of her croissant. "But now that it's come to this, we need to think about it seriously," she said with her mouth full.

"She's right," I said. "Do we choose the horse riding competition or the CMA?"

Everyone was silent for a moment. "You mean we need to pick either one of them?" Akemi said. "We have no choice," I said sadly.

"If that's the case, we should pick the competition."

"Yeah," Akemi agreed. "We can't abandon your horse farm."

"What we need to do now is to get many potential horseback riders," Sora said. "But wouldn't the CMA be more effective?" Akemi said.

"More people will watch it," Annabelle said.

"'We'll attract attention," I said. "Then what's the plan?" Akemi said.

She thought for a moment. "Who thinks that we should attend the competition?" I raised my hand. The CMA wasn't important to me anymore. I wanted to save my horse farm.

"Then who thinks you guys should perform in the CMA?" said Sora. Akemi raised her hand. Sora sighed. "You have to pick one."

"I can't decide," Akemi said. "They're both important to me."

I was silent. I didn't have anything to say. "Darlene?" Annabelle said. She was too kind.

"It's just that both are important to us," I said. I gripped my drink tightly. "Both...Are important...."

That night I had trouble sleeping. I couldn't find a comfortable position. It seemed to be made of nothing but lumps and wrinkles. I flailed around, trying to find a comfortable position, and made so much noise that I woke my father. He came into his room, rubbing his eyes, and asked, "What is it, sweetie? Nightmares?"

"No," I said. "Just can't sleep."

"Are you worried? About your horse farm?"

In answer to my dad's question, I simply said, "No, Dad, I'll be okay."

"Well then, try to relax," Dad said. "Good night, bug," he added, and closed the door.

When he was gone, I smoothed out the covers and pulled them up to my chin. I closed my eyes, trying to find sleep. But I couldn't.

....

"I wonder if it is really okay..." Akemi whispered the next day. We were sitting on the bench at the park, watching a flock of birds soar through the sky looking for food.

"It isn't," Annabelle said. "But you can choose the best option that is available to y'all. You can't perform miracles."

"We couldn't win at the last CMA regional prelims," I said. Akemi half-smiled. "So, we decide what we think is best, then try our hardest to make it work." I smiled, too. "That's true," I said. "That's how we are."

Annabelle giggled. "That's the spirit, girls."

I giggled, too. All of a sudden, a peach tree dotted with bright red peaches caught my eye. Peaches were my second favorite food, right after beans on toast, and Georgia was famous for them.

"Peaches?" Annabelle said. "I didn't reckon that they're ready to be harvested."

"Well," I said. "Georgia’s peaches are famous for how good they are."

The day for the horse riding competition came. We had decided to perform our new song "Riverside" at the preliminary qualifiers on the same day as the horse riding competition. Annabelle assigned Caroline and the others to advertise the competition and sponsor Tokyo Cowgirls.

"I heard that the first half just finished," I said to Akemi. We were in the changing room getting ready for our concert at the CMA. I swiped a dab of watermelon-moonshine lip gloss onto my lips. "It'll be our turn soon."

Akemi nodded slightly. Her face suddenly crumpled like she was about to cry. "Akemi?" I said. "What's wrong?" Akemi didn't answer. Her bottom lip trembled.

"You'll be fine," I said. "Annabelle also said that if you perform just like you did during practice, you'll be fine."

Akemi brushed her eyes with her wrist and smiled. I giggled, hoping that if she were to see me happy, she would be happy, too. Akemi giggled, too. I was relieved.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," a voice said.

Sora was wearing a flowered sundress that reached to her knees. Her waist was strapped with a brown leather belt buckle and she wore high heels. She wore bright red lipstick and her cheeks were pink with blush. She looked like a fashion model... no, a country girl!

"Sora!" I said. "You look so beautiful!"

"Is that so?" Sora said. "I decided to dress nice for your country concert, so I threw this fun outfit together."

"I always thought that you'd definitely look good in anything," Akemi said, her voice thick with tears. Sora's eyes welled up as well. She slowly walked to her sister and embraced her in a hug. Akemi tenderly pressed her cheek into her soft pink hair. "Sis..."

"You have a very sweet little sister, Sora," I said. "It's not like that," Akemi said. "She really is my pride and joy," Sora said.

I had been an only child raised by my single father on my dad's horse farm my whole life. My mom had been killed in a car crash when I was five. In my seventeen years of living, I had never wished for a little sister, or brother. But just seeing Akemi and Sora get along so well as sisters made me wish I had a big sister, too. Akemi and I had this friendship where people would mistake us as sisters, which was nice. But I wanted a real sister, someone who would compliment my outfit and give me lots of hugs.

"Now, it's time for you guys to sing your hearts out!" Sora said. I nodded and motioned for Akemi to perform.

"Contestant twenty-four!" Luke called. "Here is Tokyo Cowgirls!"

The spotlight shone on us. I squinted because of the bright light.

"Go for it, Tokyo Cowgirls!" My dad called out from the audience. He waved a green glow stick. I plucked on the G-string on my guitar to make sure it was in tune. Akemi did the same on her guitar. We began.

**A Spooky Small Town**

We were pleasantly surprised to find another message in our inbox, this time from the Nashville Country Music Association. The invitation was for us to participate in the upcoming Halloween Street celebration, an event we always look forward to. They had requested that local country performers, Courtney Jones and Tokyo Cowgirls, collaborate for the event. *Can you believe that?*

"Since passing the preliminaries, it's amazing what we're getting to do," I said while we were at Starbucks. "Will it involve singing?" Akemi asked.

"Seems like it," I said. Akemi took a swig of her pumpkin spice Frappuccino. "I'm grateful for the opportunity," she said when she finished. "But should we keep doing events like this? It's really exhausting."

"The final preliminaries are coming up," I said. "Yeah," Akemi said thoughtfully. "But isn't our goal to win the CMA?"

"Yes," I said. "But we need to take these small steps, too. The event's going to be covered by a TV station."

Akemi abruptly rose up. "TV?" she yelled. Other people stared. Some of them glared in our direction. "You changed your tune quickly," I said.

Akemi sat back down. "Sorry," she said quietly. "It's fine," I said.

I sipped my iced latte to calm myself. "If we're performing with Courtney, everyone's attention will be on us," I said. "That's what's worrying me."

"But it's a great opportunity to gain exposure," Akemi said. "I guess," I said.

Back in the barn, we discussed more about the Nashville Halloween Event. The weather had become more chilly, and the barn didn't have a heater. I wore my favorite royal blue parka, which had worn out from me wearing it so much, but I loved it with all my heart.

"This won't be a competition, right?" I said to Annabelle. "Y'all won't be compared so you don't need to fret about it," she said.

I started to relax a little. Maybe she was right. "What are you talking about?" Akemi said. "The battle had already begun!"

"Akemi's right," Sora said. "There won't be a score or rankings, but whoever leaves a bigger impression on the audience will probably get more coverage."

"And they'll remember us too," Akemi said.

"I see."

"In others words it'll help us in the final preliminaries!" I said. "That's right," Sora said.

"On top of that, Courtney Jones has won before," Akemi said. "She has a staggering lead over us when it comes to impression."

Annabelle slammed her first on the table, making us jump in fear. "What do you think y'all are doin?!" Annabelle shouted.

"Well I thought it'd put us in the mood for Halloween," I said nervously.

"Trick or treat," Akemi whispered. Annabelle sighed. "Even if you do the same thing as the previous winners, she has the advantage. Courtney is sure to be covered by the media first."

Akemi and I looked at each other. "Are you saying we're at a disadvantage?" asked Akemi.

"That's exactly what it means," Sora said. "That's why, in order to close the gap before the final preliminaries, you have to put on an impressive performance."

"In other words, this will be a prelude," Annabelle said.

A prelude. The words stuck to me.

"But in order to leave a deeper impression than Courtney..."Akemi said. She turned to Annabelle. "How can we do that?"

"I've told you plenty of times," Annabelle said. "The most important thing is having impact!"

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"Alright!" Luke Bryan said. "So here we have it!" The screen projector then switched to the Nashville Halloween Street Festival poster. "The Nashville Halloween Festival begins today!"

He then turned and pointed to the audience. "To everyone watching this broadcast…. are you cutting loose?"

I cringed. "He has more impact than we do," I whispered to Akemi. She shrugged. "He's definitely cutting loose."

Today was October 20th, and even though it wasn’t Halloween yet,  people were already wearing their costumes. Most of them were generic, such as skeletons and witches. But some of the costumes people were wearing were more specific, such as Tigger and Luke Skywalker. I wished I had worn my Annie Oakley costume. Lately, I have been obsessed with Annie Oakley, and considered her my hero.

Luke then noticed us. "Yahoo! Are y'all cutting loose?"

"Uh, yeah," I said softly. "Show us your enthusiasm for the concert!" Luke shouted. He tilted his microphone towards me. I gulped. The cameras were on me, and everyone was watching this stream. I had to say something.

"W-We'll do our best," I said softly.

Luke then turned to Akemi. "Alright, let's hear what you have to say, too."

"We'll do our best at the concert!" she said. "How country!" Luke said. Akemi blushed. She then added, "*Saiko!*"

She clapped her hand over her mouth. Titters were heard from the audience. Akemi smiled like a big stupid smiling person.

"Courtney Jones is participating in the concert, too!" Luke said. The audience roared. I looked up, and saw Courtney in her white sundress on the tv screen above.

‘’Every day, I try new things, so that I can continue to evolve," Courtney was saying.

The scene then shifted to her dressed as Bella Swan from *Twilight*. I couldn't believe she even enjoyed that movie; I found it quite off-putting. *Twilight* simply wasn't for me.

"Happy Halloween!" she shouted, and the screen faded to black. The audience cheered loudly. Confetti suddenly fell from above and covered the floor.

"Can you believe it?" Luke Bryan shouted over the noise. "I wouldn't expect any less from Courtney Jones! What an amazing impact!"

.....

"Sheesh," Akemi said back at home. "Courtney completely stole the show."

"It's your fault for doing your Japanese thing," I said. It was racist, but it was true.

"I couldn't help it!" Akemi said. "Japan is part of who I am!"

I sighed. Maybe I had been too harsh.

"In any case, this is a problem," Akemi said. "If we don't take this Halloween event seriously, we'll have trouble winning at the final preliminaries. You saw how excited the people were for Courtney."

"You're right, I understand," I said.

Akemi continued, "Despite their track record, she's not satisfied with their current situation and keep improving."

"No wonder she won."

"But it's over if she lets that impress you!" Akemi said. "I know," I said.

That afternoon, we met at Annabelle's to discuss our situation, since we didn't know what to do. I let Akemi and Annabelle do all the talking while I munched on beans on toast. For some reason, I always became hungry whenever I was nervous.

"I don't think it's possible for us to suddenly change our style," Akemi said. I nodded, my mouth full of beans.

Annabelle noticed what I was eating. She made a face.

"What's with all the beans on toast?"

"This is a rare delicacy," I said. "The bean prices had gone up at grocery stores, so we haven't had been able to make beans on toast for a while."

"But you're going to get fat!" Annabelle complained. I ignored her and took a ginormous bite of bread. Smooth.

"We don't have enough impact right now," Akemi said. "But impact comes from doing new things, right?"

"New things, huh?" I said. I put down my half-eaten hunk of bread and beans. Suddenly, I didn't feel that hungry anymore. "In that case, maybe y'all should start by changing' the atmosphere 'round here," Annabelle suggested.

Atmosphere? I didn't know if it would be a good idea. Akemi stood up from her chair. "Lately, I've been thinking that because it's been a while since you formed our duo, we now feel secure and have grown a little lazy."

"You think so?" I said. I didn't see why we could have gotten lazy. I thought that we were excited since the final preliminaries were coming up, so our practice schedule had grown more relaxed.

"If we're going to do this, we have to change," Akemi said. My jaw dropped. Change? Was she crazy?

"But how can we do that?" I asked.

It took some planning, but eventually we decided to dress up as our opposite personas for a change. Since Akemi and I were country girls, I dressed up like a 2000s skater girl instead of what I usually wore, while Akemi dressed like a 1960s hippie.

I wore my Avril Lavigne shirt, ripped blue jeans, and blue cleats. I threw my hair in a ponytail to add a tomboyish touch to my look. It was very punk-ish. I was already a tomboy, but these clothes made me look more masculine than I thought.

Akemi dressed like a 1960s hippie girl, complete with a silver top, long flowing red skirt, and round sunglasses. She had never dressed like a hippie before, but she looked pretty hot if you ask me.

"Punk is musical freedom!" I said, even though it wasn't. "I'm Darlene Johnson!"

"Life is short, so spend it happily!" Akemi declared. "I'm Akemi Chiharu!"

"We are the decade country duo, Tokyo Cowgirls!" we said together. We looked at each other and giggled. It was new and refreshing to change our persona to anything other than Southern country.

"Considering we're country singers, it's not a bad idea for us to wear all kinds of outfits from different decades," I said happily.

"But it seems like..." Akemi said. She gulped for dramatic effect. "We're just messing around!"

"That's not true!" I said. "Let's do it again!" I figured that the more we did our personas, maybe it would seem less embarrassing.

But unfortunately our plan became a bust. We were running out of time. We had to choose a way to stand out, but what could we do?

"I have an idea," Annabelle said. "Why don't you try moving away from country music?" I stared at her wide-eyed. "You mean we don't act like country girls?"

"Like being cool instead?" said Akemi. Annabelle nodded. "What is being cool like, though?" I said. "Like rock?" Akemi said. "Something wilder?"

"Doing something new means fundamentally changing your image," Sora said.

Eventually, we decided to go with a *Kiss* inspired look to have an impact. When our outfits were done, we decided to show off our brand new look to the other potential horse-back riders.

We crouched down beneath the bushes to scout the residents who were passing by. "Are we really doing this?" Akemi whispered.

"What are you afraid of now?" I said.

"We need to see how people will respond first," Akemi murmured. "What is they don't respond?"

"It'll be fine," I said. I saw Caroline passing by, and I thought that now was a good time.

I expected Caroline to look amazed at how far we came, but instead she looked terrified. I didn't know why, but I had to keep going.

"It's been a while, everyone," I said. "We're the country duo group, Tokyo Cowgirls!"

"Now feast your eyes on the new and improved Tokyo Cowgirls!" We said together, posing like rock stars. Caroline stood for a moment, then ran away shrieking as if she saw a ghost.

I grinned. "This might work," I said. Akemi smiled sheepishly.

"Darlene Violet Johnson," a familiar voice said, which was my dad. "Come back here to the horse stable. We need to have a serious talk."

Uh oh. Dad used my full name when I was in trouble. But I couldn't be in trouble. We just made a big impact. Still, my stomach tightened as if I did something wrong. I walked toward the horse stables. Akemi followed me.

In the house, Dad had his hands on his hips and was frowning. "Could you two explain what you just did?"

I turned to Akemi. "Why did this happen?" I said. "You don't remember?" Akemi said. I faced my father. "Dad, it's not what you think! We weren't just playing around!"

"It's true," Akemi said. "We were discussing ways to make it all the way to the CMA. If we let ourselves get stuck in what we've always been doing, we won't be able to produce anything new.'"

"That's right!" I said. "We were being serious! It's unthinkable for you to be angry with us!"

Akemi nodded, tears in her eyes. "In any case, we can't accept that we're in trouble!"

Dad stared at us for a moment. Then a smile crossed his face. "I understand," he said. "So you're performing at the final preliminaries like that, then?"

I nodded. "If so, then I'll allow you to continue operating in those outfits," Dad said. I shook my head. Suddenly these outfits seemed foolish. Punk rock was not our thing. Maybe we had made a fool out of ourselves.

....

"How did this happen?!" Annabelle shouted while we were at McDonald's. "She's right," Akemi said. "I thought we were seriously discussing how we could have more impact."

"It started with you," I said. "You said we should try dressing like our opposite personas.’’But then the rest was you," Akemi said.

"We decided to do it together," I said. Akemi sighed. "Blaming each other won't do any good."

"You're right," I said. "Maybe you should focus on how you're actually going to dress." Annabelle sat down. "Y'all are right."

Akemi looked down at her feet. She seemed to be zoning out, so I nudged her. "Akemi?"

"I've been thinking about it," she said, "and I want to buy something that suits everyone."

I looked at her like she was crazy. "What do you mean?"

"I don't think we should focus so much on impact," Akemi said. ‘’But if we were to do that, then we couldn't beat Courtney.’’

When we left the restaurant, it was already nighttime. I forgot that in the fall, it got dark very early. "What are we going to do?" I complained. "Let's think about it tomorrow," Annabelle said. "In any case you have to at least start working on the music."

I agreed. I gazed at the Halloween decorations around the center. Halloween seemed very different at night than during the day. The ghost decorations lit up at night, making it look ten times spookier.

....

"Yahoo!" Luke Bryan hooted. "Are y'all cutting loose? We've been covering the hype over the Nashville Halloween Festival the last few days! However, today's the final day of the event. Too bad. But don't worry. Tonight you'll get to see a special country music concert! Don't miss it!"

After Luke said his speech, Akemi and I took a walk through the city, since our turn to perform was not until seven-thirty, and right now it was three-twenty five.

"The concert's finally here," Akemi said. "I'm so nervous."

"Let's try to enjoy it while we can," I reassured her.

Akemi smiled.

"You know something, Akemi?" I said. "I think we're just fine the way we are. We tried reinventing ourselves since Courtney is so amazing. And that was just unnecessary. I think we're best the way we are now. After all, both of us are unique. Normal people hang out with people like themselves, but we're different. We took the time to get to know each other and accept each other for who they are. That's how we made it this far."

I smiled. "That's what I like about Tokyo Cowgirls."

Akemi smiled back. "Yeah, me too!"

**Miracle Road**

This morning, Annabelle received another call from her dad. He was going to establish a cap on the number of prospective horseback riders signing up for the upcoming season. We needed to secure 100 riders to enroll at my horse farm in order to boost our income. If we fell short of that number, it would be over—there would be nothing we could do.

My dad had already found a place for us to stay in Atlanta, which meant I would have to leave my friends behind. Living in the city felt daunting. I cherished the countryside deeply and took pride in being a country girl. This meant we had no option but to stake our future on this endeavor. It was our final opportunity.

To distract ourselves from the looming possibility of my horse farm closing, we focused on practicing our singing and guitar playing. The final CMA preliminaries were approaching quickly, and we needed to be exceptionally prepared.

"Darlene," Annabelle said. "Bring your voice up a lil' bit higher. That's good."

"Akemi," Sora said. "Remember to breathe in between singing. You don't want to strain your voice."

Akemi nodded. She took a deep breath, and vocalized a high note. Annabelle then clapped her hands to signal us to take a break. I was relieved. My throat was starting to hurt from singing.

"I'm so beat," Akemi sighed, sinking into a chair. "I can't speak anymore."

"Check it out," Annabelle said. "They listed the country artists that are considered most likely to go to the nationals."

She turned her phone so we could see. My heart began to pound. Could it be that we were one of them? Since the CMA was so popular, there seemed to be many people who tried to predict which artist would go to the nationals. It was overwhelming.

"What groups are in the list?" Akemi said.

Annabelle scrolled down. "Let's see. There are, of course, those who went to the nationals last year."

Last year, Luke Combs, Chris Stapleton, Carrie Underwood, and Morgan Wallen won the nationals before us. And of course, Courtney Jones.

Annabelle clicked on the link, and a photo of Courtney Jones doing her famous diva pose popped up.

"Courtney Jones," I whispered. "She passed the last regional prelims as the top-ranked country singer, and won eighth place in the final round. At nineteen years old."

"That was last year," Akemi reminded me. "She's twenty-one now."

"This is her last chance to win," Sora said. "So she's in it to win it." We studied the picture in silence. I bet she was all fired up to win this thing.

"Let's see who else," Annabelle said. She scrolled some more. Fingers crossed, fingers crossed...

"Ah, Tokyo Cowgirls!"

My jaw dropped. That was us. We did it.

Although Tokyo Cowgirls didn't pass the last regional prelims, our performance in the qualifiers this year was so successful that it was a fair match for the artists that did go to the nationals. With that said, we

were looking forward to seeing our growth since our poorly-received performance last summer in Nashville.

Annabelle scrolled further. "It says that for the regional prelims this time around, the singers who will proceed to the nationals will be decided by the votes at the prelim sites and on the internet."

"That's good," I said. "It's better than having to wait to hear the results."

Akemi sighed. "It's not that simple, unfortunately."

"Why's that?"

"Each town's residents will be at the site to root for each country singer," Akemi explained. "In terms of number of people signing up, your horse farm has the biggest disadvantage."

That evening, I clutched my lyrics notebook in my hand as I stood alone at the river, thinking about the fate of my horse farm. I kept the notebook as evidence of how far we have become as celebrities. It was really just five months ago that we became country singers, but now, that all seemed like a million years ago.

"That may be the only answer after all," someone said. I turned around, and saw her and Akemi standing behind me.

"I think so, too," Akemi said, walking towards me. She eyed the lyrics notebook that I was holding.

"That brings back memories," she said. "So you kept it, huh?"

I nodded, tears in my eyes. "Don't tell me..." I whispered. "You want me to do it?" Akemi nodded. I squeezed the notebook to my chest, my heart dripping with sadness and fear.

"You do understand the situation we're in, don't you?" Annabelle said.

I didn't say anything. What could I say? I did understand the situation we were in, but I felt like there was nothing we could do, even before Annabelle's dad set the time limit. I tried my hardest, but there was no hope.

"My feelings haven't changed," Annabelle said quietly.

"This time, I agree with her," Akemi said. "We do everything we can to keep your horse farm alive. I think that's my duty as a country singer. Moreover, this is our last chance."

A tear ran down my cheek. I sniffled and brushed my eye with my wrist. "But this isn't something we can do," I said. "It's something we cannot do."

"That's not true," Akemi said. "We were so close that time, too. So close."

"But we couldn't," I said. "We just couldn't."

I was struggling to keep myself from bursting into tears in front of my friends. It was true, I had good friends to help me save my home, but I was slowly losing hope.

Flashbacks of our poorly-received performance in Nashville began to flood my mind. I tried to be Miss Jovial Girl for our group, but on the inside I wanted to cry my eyes out. I was the leader, and I was not supposed to be sad, or else I would bring us down. Tokyo Cowgirls depended on me. I had stayed strong and optimistic for the duo. Now it was Akemi's turn.

"She's right," Akemi said. "Moreover, we have each other."

My bottom lip quivered. "No..." I whispered. "We shouldn't."

I gave the notebook one last squeeze to my chest.

I didn't care about the stupid lyrics notebook. I didn't care about winning at the CMA. I didn't care about following in our own footsteps. Hell, I could care less about my obsession with country music.

I hurled the notebook into the river, watching it sail into the air and plunge itself into the water. The notebook could be lost in the current. I don't care.

Akemi gasped, and dove into the river to try to retrieve the notebook, clothes and all. I tried to stop her, but it was too late. She had disappeared into the river, the water swallowing her up.

"Akemi!" I shrieked.

The water was static. No Akemi.

Has she drowned? No, she couldn't be underwater for that long. She would come back up eventually.

The water bubbled up, and Akemi emerged from the water, her wet pink hair now stringy. She held up the notebook that I had thrown into the river. It was dripping heavily and all the writing was probably blurred from the water. I sighed in relief. She was safe.

We pulled her back to shore by hand. Akemi was shivering as she grasped my hand and eased herself into a standing position. Since it was late fall, it was 20 degrees in the river. Or at least I thought. I didn't have a thermometer.

"Don't speak so negatively about what we did together," she said shakily. "Those memories are very precious to me.”

She let go of my hand and put her arm around me and gave me a little hug.

"That's why I want to see this through."

I let out an exhausted sigh. "I want to complete the Tokyo Cowgirls that we dreamed of back then," Akemi said.

I broke away from her and ran back home.

Later that night, I decided to set up a Zoom video chat with Tyler Hubbard so I could tell him our progress on Tokyo Cowgirls. I had just showered after getting back from the river, and I was in desperate need to talk to someone.

"How is Tokyo Cowgirls doing?" Tyler said when he joined the call. "Ya know I'm rooting for Tokyo Cowgirls."

"Meh," I said flatly. "Among the performing groups, we have the least number of people signing up for my horse farm in Monroe."

Tyler sighed. He scratched at the stubble on his chin. "Y'all are certainly are at a disadvantage."

He thought for a moment. "You'll just have to give a knockout performance to overcome your disadvantage in terms of number of horseback riders."

I sighed, too. "Yeah, I know. But a knockout performance..."

"I think it's something more than simply being the best," Tyler said. "In this generation, many country singers can sing and play guitar in the same league as our amateur country singers."

He paused. "But no one thinks that they're equals."

I nodded. "The shine of the pioneers who established the popularity of the CMA from the beginning," Tyler continued.

He took a deep breath. "It's the light that can never be reached..."

"The light that can never be reached," I repeated.

That night I couldn't sleep as usual. The question was still lingering in my mind: What makes us Tokyo Cowgirls? I still haven't figured it out since we had our big performance in the preliminaries last summer, despite me telling everyone that I knew what made us different. I thought I knew the answer, but I didn't.

During vocal warmups, I told my idea to my teammates. Of course, Akemi was surprised that I cared.

"Yes," I said. "What does it mean for us to walk our own path? What is our shine?"

"I have come to realize that it is important to find the answers after performing in the CMA, yet I can't put them into words. They haven't taken shape," I continued. "I want them to take shape."

Annabelle looked thoughtful. "To hear something like that from Darlene now..."

She said dramatically, "I reckon it's be fate." My ears perked up. "I'll tell them about that, okay?" Annabelle said.

"What?" I said. "But, but that's..."

"What are you talking about?" Akemi demanded.

"There's this lyric notebook that you and I created in order to advance to the CMA final round in the future," I said.

"Lyrics?" Sora said.

"We had a bad performance in Nashville," Akemi said. "In addition, it'll be a lot of work for the two of us, too." She sighed. "What point is there in taking such a big risk now?"

"Why not?' I said, perking up. Why should bother carrying the trauma of our first performance in Nashville? I was not going to stomp around in a sulk like a kicked-around puppy. We were going to show up at the CMA awards and let everyone know that we were the best.

Akemi stared at me. I grabbed her hand, startling her. "Akemi!" I said. "When are we gonna do it if we don't do it now? We made a promise at the beginning, didn't we?"

I smiled. "Let's struggle as hard as we can! The CMA is right in front of us. I want us to do everything we can!"

Akemi didn't smile. "But this song requires a lot from the person who is the lead singer," Akemi said. "You have to sing soprano. Usually I sing in that tone, but can you really do it, Darlene?"

I stood in front of her, determined. I wouldn't give up, even if I had to sing soprano. "It'll be fine," I said. "I can do it."

"Looks like it's decided," Annabelle said. "Let's hand that notebook over, Akemi."

Akemi hesitated, then nodded.

"In order to make a breakthrough as Tokyo Cowgirls, there's a wall that you must overcome without fail," Annabelle explained.

"Now is the time to hand it over," Sora said. "Go ahead."

Akemi sighed. "But let me tell you one thing. If I judge that it costs you your vocal cords, I'll stop you, Darlene, even if it means we have to withdraw from the CMA, okay?"

I nodded, and soon the lyrics notebook was my responsibility.

All by myself, I practiced day and night. It was rough, and I cracked my voice five times, while singing soprano. Once my voice recovered, I started again. It was long, hard work on my vocal cords, but I didn't give up. I coughed a couple times, and resumed singing.

"Here we go!" I said. I took a deep breath, and began to sing my solfège: "Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, Re, Ti..." But when I got to the high "Do," my voice cracked. I flew into a fit of coughing, but luckily, Sora had a water bottle to calm my throat.

"Are you okay?" Sora said. I cleared my throat. "I-I'm okay, I'm okay..."

I sipped the water, coughed a few times, and opened my mouth to start singing again, but Sora stopped me.

"Let's take a little break," she said. "You've been doing this for five days. You'll get sick."

"No," I said. "I can still keep going. I feel like I'm almost there."

"There are only two weeks until the regional prelims," Annabelle reminded me. "If you push too hard and lose your voice now..." She broke off.

"Yeah, I know..." I said. Akemi glanced at me in the corner. She shrugged.

"You know," I said, "When I sang for the first time, I thought, I couldn't have done anything without everyone's support. At the CMA regional prelims...and the last qualifiers, too. I was able to do my best because I was with you, Akemi. Everyone in our hometown has helped us, too."

I smiled. "So, I want to repay their support at least once. I'll be careful not to lose my voice. So let me try a little bit longer."

Days went by, and I was slowly killing my voice. Clearing my throat and sips of water helped very little, but I still wouldn't give up. Akemi still thought that I would lose my voice and withdraw from the preliminary qualifiers, but I would show her otherwise.

Akemi had promised me that I would give up if I couldn't do it by tomorrow morning, but I wouldn't let that happen. The CMA preliminaries were counting on me. Even if I were to lose my voice, I would still keep going. Even if I worked hard, I wouldn't be at my limits.

It was the middle of the night, but I still wouldn't give up. That was just the type of person I was. I could see the finish line getting closer and closer!

Annabelle and Akemi found me practicing alone in the barn after my father told her of where I was. They were bewildered when they found out that I was practicing in the middle of the night.

"She said that if she asked you to come, you'd probably stop her," Akemi was saying. "So..."

"I'm sorry," Annabelle said. "That's okay," said Akemi. "But it's in the middle of the night..." Her voice trailed off.

I stopped vocalizing to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Well after my sister that to her--" Akemi said. "Since she herself was the same way when she was younger, she may know better than anyone how hard it is."

I shrugged it off and continued with my solfege scales. I was doing great. My voice was clear as glass on the low parts of the solfege. It was that when I got to the high "do" was when things took a turn for the worst.

I gasped for breath. My voice had been strong for as long as it could. Now I fell out of my chair, toppled over on my hands and knees, and choked. Akemi ran over to me and grabbed me by the shoulders and tried to steady me as I coughed and hacked.

"You should take a break," she said. "N-no..." I managed between choking sobs. "I...can...do...it."

With a flushed face and bulging eyes, I tried to start from the beginning, but coughs caught in my throat. I started again, but my voice wouldn't put itself to work. Every time I tried to speak, I flew into a fit of coughing.

Akemi held my shoulders tighter, tears pressing her eyes. "Don't fight it," she said. "Your body knows what it needs. Don't fight it."

My coughing eased slightly. I took a shuddering breath, and then another. I looked at her just as another spasm shook my body.

"What am I doing wrong?" I choked. Annabelle took my hand to calm me. "Don't get frustrated," she said. "Just relax and practice like usual."

I stared at her with watery eyes. "You can do it!" Akemi said. She took my other hand. "I know you can do it!"

She and Annabelle lifted me back into my chair. I shook my head to remove the light-headed feeling.

"We'll be watching you!" Akemi said. I smiled. Okay, I would give it another try. I cleared my throat and took a deep breath.

"Darlene!"

I glanced over, and saw Caroline, Mavis, and Brittney looking through the barn door. Caroline and her friends all had Tokyo Cowgirls t-shirts that we had sold on our website for our fans. "Fight on!" They screamed together.

"Go for it, Tokyo Cowgirls!" Caroline shouted. I sighed. Okay, here goes. I took a deep breath, and began. "Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, Re, Ti..."

When I got to the high Do, as usual, my voice cracked, and I was off on another coughing bout. Akemi winced and held me. She couldn't bear to look at my face, so she squeezed her eyes shut.

When the coughing cleared, I groaned. "This is supposed to be the scene where I do it!"

Tears teetered on my eye lashes. Why? Why couldn't I do it? Akemi, Annabelle, Sora, my father... Everyone was rooting for me so much and yet, I still couldn't do it. The CMA finals were waiting for us, and yet I still couldn't pass the finish line. No! I couldn't give up! I haven't done anything yet. I haven't been able to do anything yet.

I began to tremble, and I felt the sinking and dissolving inside of me that meant I was going to cry. My legs gave away like wet paper and I slid off my chair until I was sitting on the ground, with my head on my knees. Trembling, my mind was a wordless whirl of dread.

I felt an arm wrap around me and pat me on the back. Her soft voice felt like a feather. "Do you still think that you're a normal person?"

I uncovered my arms and looked at her meekly. "What?"

"You're the lead singer, but we've come this far because of everyone's help," Akemi said. "But you haven't done anything at all. You're thinking all that, aren't you?"

I looked down at the ground. "Yeah, because it's true," I said. Akemi and Annabelle giggled. "Darlene," Akemi said. "Who should you thank for getting this far?"

I sighed. "That's..." I tried to think of something to say. "Everyone in the neighborhood, the townspeople, Akemi, Annabelle, and—"

"Haven't you forgotten the most important person?" interrupted Akemi.

I stared at her, confused. What did she mean?

"Who should we thank for creating the current Tokyo Cowgirls together? Who suggested starting it first?" Akemi explained.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

"Because of you, Darlene, I started to become a country musician. No one else could've created the current Tokyo Cowgirls."

As she said this, flashbacks from when I first brought up the idea of being a country singer after we saw the Florida Georgia Line concert in Nashville appeared in my mind, almost a year ago. The memory was vivid enough that I could actually see it.

"Because of you, we're here now," Akemi said. She smiled. "Don't forget that."

"Someone who thinks she's average continues to challenge herself without givin' up," Annabelle said. "I think that's pretty impressive! I think it requires quite a lil' bit of courage."

Akemi went over to me and took my hand and faced me. We were a few inches away from a kiss, not that it would ever happen. "That's who you are, Darlene. That's why we both want to try our best. That's why I wanted to be part of Tokyo Cowgirls."

"Don't do this because you reckon you owe it to all of us," Annabelle said. "We are all excited about being able to find your own shine with you, Darlene."

I smiled wobbly. "Everyone..." I whispered, the words escaping from my tongue.

"Are you ready?" Akemi said. Her eyes twinkled with joy. I nodded. Yes! I was ready! I took a deep breath, and shouted into the early-morning sky.

"I CAN DO THIS!!!!"

As I said that, the edge of the sky turned gray, and then pale orange, and then deep fiery crimson. And then, the color seeped out of the sky and washed over the land. Light sparkled on the soft hair of the hills and shone through the lacy autumn leaves as every shade of green sprang to life around us.

The sky arched over us, higher than I could ever imagine, a pale, clear, blue. The blue of the river. The blue of Sora's eyes.

We lived on Miracle Road, a road of failure and hardships. There were some times where we could get lost. There were times where we felt like we couldn't make it.  We would cry. But despite that, we would pick ourselves back up and push through the limits to make miracles happen. With this shining light!

**Time Flies**

"Well, everyone!" Luke Bryan announced after our performance was over, "We're now going to announce the CMA finalists!" As soon as he said that, the tv screen came to life as the words Country Music Association finalists flashed on the screen.

Next, there was the graph of the country artists who would participate in the final round of the CMA, depending on how well they did. The graphs zoomed across the screen, calculating everyone's progress. A spiderweb of sweat dripped out of my forehead. I cradled my guitar. Could this be it? Could we have passed the preliminaries? Akemi clasped her hands together and shouted, "*Onegai!"*

Then, a gold star took its place on the graph, and soon the results popped up. Heart pounding, I read the results that were shown on the screen. Carrie Underwood, Morgan Wallen, and Tokyo Cowgirls. My heart stopped. Tokyo Cowgirls. That was us.

"And these winners are these three artists!" Luke Bryan said, gesturing at the tv screen. A spotlight fell on us. I rubbed my eyes. Could I be dreaming? Have we really made it to the finals?

"Darlene!"

Akemi ran over and threw her arms around my neck, her head nuzzling my cheek, guitar and all. In her grasp, I stared at the screen. Tokyo Cowgirls. I must be dreaming. There was no way that we won the finals.

"This is not a dream," Akemi whispered. "This is not a dream..."

"Really?" I said, out of breath. "Because this means the finals. The Grand Ole Opry!"

Akemi let go of me and took my hand and stared into my eyes. "If it's real, it's a miracle!"

"It *is* a miracle," I said. "We made a miracle happen."

This was not a dream after all. We had really advanced to the finals! Now all we needed to do was practice even harder than before. And then we would be country music champions!

To get a sense of what the Grand Ole Opry was like, we took a bus to Opry Mills Drive after our performance. When we arrived, our breath was taken away as the Grand Ole Opry building loomed over us, looking like a giant gold mansion. This was the place where country singers performed after they passed the preliminaries. The place where country singers made miracles. The place where Florida Georgia Line originated.

"We need to make a great song!" Akemi said. "Let's make the lyrics even more meaningful," I said.

All of a sudden, music came out of nowhere. I strained my ears to recognize the song.

"Look!" Akemi said. I looked up, and saw that the tv screen from the building was playing the live performance to our new song, *Miracle Road*. And best of all, the view count was the highest we've ever gotten in a while.

I watched it for a while, my eyes glued to the screen.

"It's only natural, considering the number of people who come to our ranch we had to overcome," Akemi said. "That many people had to watch us and support us.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Then we should've gotten people signing up, too!"

The faint ringtone of Florida Georgia Line began to play from underneath my pocket. I reached for my phone. "Hello?"

"My phone must be frozen or something," A voice with a southern accent said. I gulped. "Annabelle?"

"We gained a few more horseback riders yesterday," Annabelle said. "It ain't changin' today."

"Wasn't it the deadline your dad gave us tonight?" Akemi chimed in.

"It's okay," said Annabelle. "We still have time. We can see the latest number on my computer, right?"

Back in Monroe, we met with Annabelle and Sora in the barn to check on the sign up website for my horse farm. The air was so chilly that my breath made soft clouds. It was November 16th, the day of the time limit to get 100 horseback riders to save our ranch that was set by Annabelle's dad.

Huddled down in my blue parka, I kept an eye on my watch. It was 8:00 in the morning, and we only had four hours left to do something. Annabelle typed something into the laptop, as we waited. Seconds later, her brow furrowed. "It hasn't changed," she said sadly.

"No way..." Akemi whispered.

"How are our views?" I asked, changing the subject. "They keep growing," Annabelle said flatly. She suddenly stood up from the stack of hay bales. "I'll go call my dad.''

8:00 turned into 9:00, and the sign up count hasn't changed. Nor has the income. We lounged around the barn, waiting for the count to go up, even an inch. Annabelle had been gone for an hour. She said she would be away for 15 minutes, but minutes turned to hours.

When I was starting to lose hope, I heard the familiar sound of the barn door opening, and there she was with a sympathetic smile on her face.

"Sorry I kept y'all waiting," she said.

"Were you able to talk to your dad?" I asked. Annabelle nodded. "I told him that you guys are going to the final round and the view count is going crazy."

"And?" Akemi said.

Annabelle fell silent, prompting Sora to finish. "She managed to get an extension until tomorrow morning." "

Relief fell over me. There was more time to save my horse farm.

"But it'll only be until five in the morning," Sora said. "If we can't get a hundred horse back riders by then, they'll close down the sign up website."

"So this is the final notice, huh?" Akemi said sadly. "But we now have eight hours when we only had three hours left earlier," I said, trying to look on the bright side.

Annabelle suddenly gasped. "Look!" she said. She showed me her laptop, which revealed to me the sign up page for my horse farm. The sign up count was 89, when before it was 88.

"We just got one more person," she explained. I became desperate. I knew that people wouldn't just sign up for horseback riding lessons for the horse farm, because of how unpopular it was. Maybe we could go to the train station in downtown Monroe to ask people to support the horse farm in front of the station.

Sora looked doubtful. "If it keeps going up at this rate..."

I ran to the door and was about to go off, but Akemi and Annabelle stopped me. "We can't do it this late," she said.

"Then let's put on a concert!" I said. "We'll stream it on the internet, and..."

"Morning will be here before we're done preparing for it," Sora pointed out.

I was about to speak, but then Annabelle threw her arms around me to shut me up. She was very close so I could smell the coconut shampoo she used on her hair.

"Calm down," she said shakily. "It's okay. It's okay..."

"But we can't just sit around and do nothing," I complained. Akemi thought for a moment and said, "We just have to believe in our performance today."

I took a moment to let that sink in. Maybe she was right. So many people watched us on the live stream, so we would be okay. I smiled, my spirits lifted up. "Now that that's settled, you guys are free to go."

"Going home?" Akemi said, shocked. "I feel like I'll get stressed out if I'm by myself."

"Yeah," Annabelle said. "'We can't relax because we're so anxious."

Sora winked at me. "You heard them."

I thought it over. Maybe they were right. We were all stressed out about the numbers rising, so staying at home alone would only intensify the stress. "I guess it can't be helped, then."

"So it's okay to stay?" Akemi said.

"If you can get permission from your families, it'll be okay," I said, smiling.

Hours ticked by. It was now 4:00 in the afternoon, according to my watch. A few hours ago, we were thrilled that we had got another person who signed up, raising the sign up count to 90. But we haven't gotten any more since.

"Even though our town is pretty and the people are kind, not many people would go so far as to come to your horse farm," Annabelle said thoughtfully.

I nodded. There was no escaping the truth. No matter how much I would stream our concerts on the internet and set up fliers around town, people still wouldn't come and check out the horses for lessons. Therefore the income would decrease. For some reason, flashbacks of our poorly-received concert in Nashville last summer started to flood my brain.

*No matter how hard we practice, it's just not good enough.*

While I worried, the barn was silent. The day grew darker. I was beginning to feel hungry, but there was no way that we could eat something when we were stressed out. I hoped my stomach wouldn't growl loudly in front of my friends. As you know, I have really loud hunger pangs which I was trying hard to control. Whenever I would be hanging out with Akemi, my stomach would always let out a loud groan at the most random time, which made Akemi dissolve into a fit of giggles. It was embarrassing.

I saw Sora glance at her watch. My heart thudded. Maybe time had already run out.

‘’Why don’t we get something to eat?’’

Akemi and I stared at Sora and then at each other. What was going on? If we were to eat, we might lose track of time and then the time would run out.

‘’But…’’

‘’You want to ask your papa if we could stay for dinner?’’ Annabelle said.

‘’Um, sure,’’ I said.

Back in the house, Dad made mac and cheese with tomatoes, which was extremely delicious, and normally made my mouth water.

We ate in silence until the edge was taken off our hunger.

After we had eaten, Sora and I excused ourselves to talk about the fate of my horse farm. It was pitch black by the time we were outside. Crickets chirped faintly, and a cold night breeze whipped across my face. I was glad that I was in my parka, all cozy and warm.

"Seriously," Sora groaned. "Do Annabelle and I have to do everything for you guys? I'm working my butt off to help you and Akemi sing properly and help you save your horse farm, all at once!"

I tried to stay calm. Sora could be infuriating at times. "It can't be helped then," I said. "Akemi and I formed the current Tokyo Cowgirls ourselves."

"You don't have to." Sora said, looking away. "As far as I'm concerned, I have nothing but gratitude."

She gulped and stared at me in shame. "I-I only became the vocal coach to support my sister, you know!"

I smiled. "So I take care of her. That's what friends are for, Sora."

Sora looked at me in confusion. I took her hand and gazed up at the night sky. The stars showed the great country singers of the past that watched over us, and someday we would be those stars in the sky, too. If one or both of the Tokyo Cowgirls members suddenly passed away, we would be one of stars watching over.

.....

No one was tired yet, so we told my dad that my friends and I were having a sleepover, even though in reality, we were waiting for more people to sign up.

The good news was that while we were away, we gained another horseback rider, making the sign up count 94. The bad news was that we had less than an hour left, and the deadline was 7:00 in the morning. If the sign up count didn't increase by then, we would be doomed.

Desperate, I grabbed the computer from Annabelle and shouted at it to increase. It was a dumb decision, but I didn't care. Of course the sign up count didn't go up an inch. Not even a millimeter.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Akemi in the corner of my room slouched over against the wall, her head nodding and her eyes shut. She was snoring, which surprised me. Akemi rarely snored when I invited her over for sleepovers. Sometimes I heard her talk in her sleep, but never snoring.

"Are you sleeping?" I said. Akemi stirred slightly and opened her eyes. "I'm not sleeping," she whispered. "But waiting is making me kinda tired."

The next morning, Akemi and Sora found me perched on the fence, just like how she found me before we became country singers. I beckoned for them to join me. Akemi came towards me and swung her leg over the fence, while Sora sat down on the pasture.

"Any luck?" Sora said. "Nope," I said. "We need more! Just six more!"

I clasped my hands together and said, "Please!"

Sora also clasped her hands together."*Onegai*!"

Akemi, however, cupped her hands against her cheeks and shouted, "Hey!"

Her call was loud enough so the whole neighborhood could hear it. Sora and I looked at each other, astonished. "Darlene's horse farm is really awesome!" Akemi shouted.

Sora giggled, and then called out, "Hey!"

When her call echoed, she then screamed, "You'll never regret coming here!"

"The horses are really friendly!" I shouted. My call echoed through the mountains. Surely people would come sign up by then, since we yelled loud enough.

"I guarantee it, y'all!" A voice called out. I glanced over and there was Annabelle standing in the distance with her hands cupped to her face, shouting into the distance. I giggled. "She gave them a guarantee."

"Y'all can bank on my guarantees," Annabelle said happily.

We looked at each other and started laughing. How funny, the four of us acting like advertising professionals!

Meanwhile, the number of horseback riders rose up to 97, so we had only three more to get to a hundred! Just three more! But unfortunately, we were running out of time. We had less than an hour left, and if we didn't make it to 100, there was nothing we could do.

I had to keep convincing myself it was fine, because I was just about to have a panic attack. Waiting has never put so much stress on me, especially if it was for the sake of where I live.

"Please go up!" I screamed to the computer, my voice beginning to crack. "Please!"

Annabelle's brow furrowed. She blinked to hold back tears. Heart beating, I dug my fingernails into my palms.

"Ninety-eight!" Akemi said. Relief flooded over me. Just two more to go!

"And the time?" Sora said, pointing to the clock.

"It'll be fine." I wasn't sure if I was trying to convince her or myself. But it didn't matter anymore. "I'm sure it'll reach a hundred."

I kept staring at the sign up count, while trying to keep in mind the time, too. The hour hand grew closer and closer to the twelve, and I was growing more and more desperate. All I could do was repeat the same words over and over again, my palms sweating and heart pounding.

"It'll be fine!"

All of a sudden the sign up page turned into an on-screen banner that said, *Sign Up Closed*. I knew for once, it was over. My heart grew heavy. "Sign up...closed?"

"We ran out of time," Sora explained.

"Running out of time?" I forced a laugh. It couldn't be. It couldn't be the end. We haven't even struggled yet. All we needed was another extension. Just another day, or a half day, or even an hour would do. I swear to god, it couldn't be the end of the battle.

"It's impossible," I said calmly. "We just need two more people."

"Yeah," Akemi said. "It won't take forever."

Sora voice cracked as she said, "We promised."

Akemi slowly looked at me. A tear ran down her cheek. "She's right. We don't need a lot of time. Just one more day..."

"We talked to him many times. We talked to him over and over all night," Sora explained, her voice trembling over the words. Akemi burst into tears and buried her face into Sora's chest. Sora, also fighting back tears, gently stroked Akemi's hair to comfort her.

"He already gave us two extensions," Sora said.

Annabelle's bottom lip quivered. "Even my dad doesn't have the authority to decide on anything himself."

Akemi sniffled and said, "Even if it's just one day..."

"We were able to get the extensions before," I said desperately.

"They've already started the process to adopt the horses into another horse farm that will take good care of them," Annabelle said.

"You mean it's really all over?" I whispered. No one said anything, maybe because they were all processing my horse farm closing down. I saw a thousand images having to do with my horse farm — me riding Starlight into the sunset while Akemi riding Dusty Trails, brushing Starlight's soft mane while I wore my baseball cap, Starlight comforting me when I had a bad day, Starlight neighing. The horse strong, the horses cocky, the horses brave. *My horse farm.*

I swallowed my tears, and made myself breathe slowly, deeply. I would not cry over my horse farm closing down as though the horses were going to be mistreated at the new horse farm that they were going to be adopted. It was not like they were going to be slaughtered and turned into food for dogs. They would adjust to their new home and win.

"It can't be," I whispered. "We haven't fought yet. We said we'd fight tooth and nail. And we said we'd fight with everything Tokyo Cowgirls had!"

"You gave it everything you had," Sora said. "And you made it to the finals. You've done everything you could."

I slowly walked away from the group, my face scrunched into tight wrinkles. Then without warning, I cried out and smashed my fist into the barn wall right where Annabelle was standing. I breathed hard. Everything was bright. Everything happened slowly. Dimly, I heard Annabelle scream out my name in terror. If she could have smashed her fist into a wall, she would as well. Sora said something too, but I didn't know what, and I didn't care.

I clenched my jaw, feeling tears pour out of my eyes and drop onto the dirt ground. My shoulders shook. "Then why is my horse farm closing?" I sobbed. "Why couldn't we save the horse farm? Why couldn't we make Dad proud?"

"We have to face reality," Annabelle said. "The horse farm..."

She gulped. "Will be shutting down."

It was official. The horses would be sold to another horse farm in Illinois where they would get food and shelter, which was good for the horses, especially Starlight. But what about me?

Dad and I visited downtown Atlanta so I could get a feel of the city, but of course, I hated it. We found an apartment that was available, but it was tiny and only had three rooms. The floor was smothered with grease and the walls were grimy with soot. It was nothing like my cozy farm house in Monroe.

Since Akemi and Annabelle would not be coming with me, we would only be able to video chat and call each other, while she would still be in Monroe and I would be in Atlanta.  It wouldn't be the same. Akemi and I hung out almost everyday, so it would be a change to not see her as often as I used to.

While it was unfortunate that my horse farm would be terminated, the CMAs were approaching quickly. We had to practice harder than before and turn that zero into a one!

"Let's forget what happened up until yesterday," Annabelle said during practice. "Let's get a fresh start today and work hard so you guys can win the final round!"

I nodded slightly, lost in thought. "We have to believe that we can!" Akemi said to me. I snapped out of it. "Yep. Let's win!"

I stood up and grabbed my guitar. I would be Miss Jovial Girl, no matter what happened. The finals were calling my name.

"Everybody ready?" Sora said.

Akemi and I nodded. I strummed my C scale carefully, trying not to mess up like I always do. For some reason, guitar practice wasn't the same as it always was. Could it be that the guitar was too heavy? Or could it be that my heart, layered with facade, was weighing me down.

As I strummed, yesterday's events began to flood my mind — the time running out, the applicant’s closed banner, and the stress of waiting. I stopped strumming for a moment. I closed my eyes.

"Darlene?" Annabelle said. I felt a tear trickle down my cheek, but I wasn't going to give it the relief of wiping it away. Akemi stopped strumming and looked at me, concerned. "What's wrong...?"

I wiped my eye with my wrist, and managed to choke out, "Guys.."

"Shall we just not practice today?" Sora suggested.

"What, why?" I said. "I'm alright."

I curved the corners of my mouth into the best smile-shape I could, but I could tell it wasn't working. I knew that Sora was trying to help, but it wasn't working.

Annabelle half-smiled. "My apologies," she said. "I thought we should focus on what's ahead even if we had to force ourselves. But feelings don't really work like that, do they?"

I stared at her, bewildered. What did she mean by that?

Annabelle came up to me and took my hand. Her grayish blue eyes twinkled with kindness. "It ain't just you, Darlene," she said gently. "You and Akemi feel the same way."

"You actually think that we can all let go just like that?" Sora said. I shook my head no.

"I think we should take some time to think after all," Akemi said. "About whether we should really perform in the CMA final round, or..."

Sora smiled apologetically. "I think Akemi's right."

"W-wait," I said. "Of course Tokyo Cowgirls is going to perform!" I became frantic. This was going to be the final round. If we passed it, we would be the champions of the country music industry!

Annabelle looked down at the ground. "Do you really feel that way?" she said. I nodded.

"Ask yourself."

I stared at her like she was nuts. Ask myself what? What was there to ask myself? Akemi and I were going to perform at the CMA, right? So what was there to ask?

"Not just Darlene," Annabelle continued. "Both of y'all, ask yourself."

Sometimes when things didn't go my way, and when I felt like crying, I would bite my lip and pray to myself, let tomorrow be a better day. To try again at the CMA awards. To shine as a country singer. But biting my lip and praying wouldn't do any good now that my horse farm would be closing down. And to top it all off, losing my home, the countryside where I lived all my life, since I was born.

My friends, Annabelle, Sora, and Akemi, they would all be stuck in Monroe, without me. Poor sweet little Akemi, all alone, no one to hang out with. At least she would have Sora.

Good luck with the CMA, all those posters would say. Win the CMA awards. The words would replay like a broken record. The feelings seemed like they would connect like branches in a tree, but they didn't.

Singing scales. Winning the CMA. Guitar playing. Should I tell God that I could still keep trying, even if I couldn't? No. Hmm, what would you be, little chick? A rooster? A mallard? Maybe...Maybe, you'll never hatch. I couldn't save you. I tried to, but I couldn't.

One day, feeling lonely, I drove to Chastain Park, because it was the closest thing I could get to nature and because it was free. It was 30 degrees, so of course no one was around.

The amphitheater was completely deserted, so it was almost peaceful. I almost imagined Tokyo Cowgirls performing here at the park, outside and in nature, but we thought it would be better to perform at another venue that was farther away.

I walked toward the ice-skating rink. I wished I had enough dollars for a cup of hot chocolate, but I had blown all my money on Nashville trips and junk. What a waste. What was the point in trying for the CMA awards if we couldn't save my horse farm?

I walked back to the amphitheater, and sitting on one of the bleachers was Akemi. "Good morning," she said, neither friendly nor unfriendly. "Good morning," I said back in a similar tone.

"Everyone came here after all," someone said. Sora was standing above us, smiling. She had seemed to forget about what happened two weeks ago. Annabelle was there too, her arms folded in such a badass way.

"This shows that everyone feels the same way after all,"

I smiled through my facade, walked away from the group, and sat down on the bleachers, trying not to break down.

"I know that it'd be better if Darlene and I go and perform," Akemi was saying. "But we couldn't save the horse farm. And yet, we go to the final round and sing. Even if we could win..."

"You and Darlene didn't form Tokyo Cowgirls just to save the horse farm," Sora said. "We wanted to find our shine," Akemi said. "To find the shine in every one of us."

"We can't find it," I blurted out. My voice hitched. "Because my home will be gone even if we win."

I stood up, tears in my eyes. My back faced the group. I didn't want them to see my crying face.

"If we had caused a miracle and saved my home, we could have shined. We could have found our shine. But we couldn't save my horse farm..."

A sob broke out of me. "I don't think that we'll be able to find our shine!"

Annabelle looked down at the ground. Akemi and Sora looked shocked. "Right now, I don't care about the CMA," I said. "I don't care about our shine. Or miracles."

I finally turned back to my friends, burning with desperation. "I want to save my horse farm! The place where we spent so much time together..." I broke off.

Faces scanned each other, unsure of what to say.

"Then save it!" someone called.

I turned around, and stared in disbelief. Caroline, Mavis, and Brittney were with a whole crowd of people from Atlanta, holding up glow sticks, even though we were not performing. They were all wearing our T-shirts that we had sold on our website and printed out by our manager.

"Go perform in the CMA!" Caroline called. "And win!"

"Everyone..." Akemi whispered. "If I could, I'd do it in a heartbeat!" I shouted. "If I could keep struggling together with everyone, and..."

"And?"

"And keep the horse farm alive!" I shouted. I sobbed with my eyes closed and imagined I was falling, with the wind whooshing past me and nothing but darkness underneath me.

"Is that really the only way you can save the horse farm?!" Mavis shouted. I lifted up my head and sniffled.

"We asked everyone around town what they wanted you and Akemi to do that would make them happy," Brittney said. "Everyone said the same thing. We want you to win the CMA! Not just for your own sake, but for our sake, and the horse farm!"

"You're our only hope!" Caroline said. "You guys are the only ones who can do it!"

"Tokyo Cowgirls, the best country singers in America!" Brittney shouted. "We want you make that name forever part of country music history!"

"So... Shine!"

My lungs were expanding twice their size. "By winning..." Akemi whispered. "Our name will..."

"In the CMA..." Annabelle whispered back. Sobs burbled up inside of me, but this time, they were happy tears. "Are we giving up?"' Akemi asked me.

"Why would I give up?" I whispered. "I can't do that. I won't do that!"

I stood up with determination and faced the crowd. "We will win! We won't just win, we'll knock it out of the park! It doesn't matter who we're up against! The Grand Ole Opry, the final round...None of that matters! We will win and leave my horse farm's name in country music history! Let's make memories that will never fade!"

Annabelle grinned. "Yeah! They're all like, 'Hit us with everything you've got!"

"But just watching them somehow gets me fired up!" Akemi said.

Annabelle giggled. "Whew! I need to let this energy out!" she said. "How about we go for a run?"

"Then let's go!" Akemi said. My friends laughed and skipped away from the amphitheater. But I stayed back and looked up at the early morning sky. The breeze fluttered my hair as I thought about winning the final round and performing at the Grand Ole Opry, all while leaving my horse farm in the history of country music!

**Brentwood!**

"Where are we?" Akemi whispered as the wind howled like a pack of wolves, driving the snow in swirling clouds that obscured everything in sight. It was finally December, which meant it was almost Christmas. Eeeeeee! I loved Christmas, and wanted to marry it, but I would never spell it the bad way with the "X" plus the "mas."

I looked around. All I could see was white, and nothing else. The landscape was transformed into a frozen wasteland, with drifts of snow piling up against buildings and trees. The cold was so biting that it felt like tiny needles piercing through every layer of clothing.

"We can't see anything," I said.

Akemi yawned. "I'm getting sleepy for some reason." She sank down to the ground. I gasped. "No! If you fall asleep, you'll die!"

"This is a dream," Akemi whispered sleepily. "It has to be. There's no way that it'd snow this hard in Monroe."

I closed my eyes. Maybe if I were to fall asleep, I'd wake up at my house again. Through the darkness behind my closed eyeballs, I imagined being in my warm bed, cozy and warm, with wooly socks caressing my feet.

"Or not," Akemi said. I opened my eyes. The snow had cleared up a bit, enough for me to see that we were in — drum roll please — Brentwood!

We received the CMA Awards Brentwood Regional Prelims Viewing Guide featuring the Tokyo Cowgirls, a country duo from Monroe, Georgia. Can you believe it? They made it to the finals!

We made our way to the Brentwood Stadium in the heart of downtown. A large crowd had gathered, eager to see the participants in the Regional Prelims Final Round.

The TV screen flickered to life, displaying "Brentwood University."

Suddenly, a photo of a cheerful, tall woman with red hair wearing a white sundress appeared.

*Courtney Jones, a 21-year-old junior at*

*Brentwood University.*

"Just as you would expect from one of the event favorites!" Akemi exclaimed. I glared at her.

"Pardon me," someone said. I turned around. A tall man with a thick scruffy beard appeared behind us. He was wearing a tuxedo. His Southern accent was thicker than grits. His vowels were grits, taking up half the space in his mouth.

"Y'all are Tokyo Cowgirls, I reckon?"

Something between a croak and a squeak escaped from my mouth. Was this guy really talking to me? Normally I had no problem talking to the people in Nashville, but something seemed off. Why was this fully grown man talking to us?

"Would it be dandy if..." The man scratched his beard and pulled out a camera. "Can we take a photo with you ladies?"

"Whoa, hold on!" Akemi said, surprised. "We just need to calm down, okay!"

"You're the only one freaking out," I told her.

The picture was taken, and the man couldn't have been more happy. "Thanks a lot, y'all!" The man said with a salute. "We're rooting for you! Good luck at the CMA!"

"Thanks for your support!" I said happily. "Have a great day!"

"I guess advancing to the final round is a really big deal," Akemi said softly.

Even though Courtney Jones was very rude to us when we lost last summer, I still wanted to congratulate her on winning the preliminary qualifiers at the CMA. I thought that everybody deserves support, even the not-so-nice performers. That was just the kind of person I was.

We approached the CMA changing rooms with an open mind. Maybe if we were nice to Courtney, maybe, just maybe, she would be nice to us back. I opened the door a crack. "Hello? Is anyone here?" I said. "We just wanted to say hi to Courtney Jones."

"Come on in," someone said. The voice was more youthful sounding and less adult-like. I opened the door wider. A more younger looking red headed girl with blue eyes who looked similar to Courtney sat cross legged at the front desk. Courtney was there too, already in her performance outfit. I smiled, hoping she would smile back. But Courtney didn't smile back. She just looked at us and didn't say a word.

"Hi, it's good to see you," the girl said. 'I'm Abigail, Courtney's little sister."

"Nice name," Akemi said.

"Sorry to intrude right before your big sister's performance," I said quietly.

"Don't worry about it," Abigail said. "I'm glad you ladies will get to see it. Especially since it will be a while until my sister competes in the final round."

"Yeah, we're looking forward to it," I said, smiling.

"That's not surprising," Akemi said. "After all she did have an overwhelming score on last year's prelims."

"Which is impressive," Abigail said. "But it could also be that Courtney is just trying to show off. Kind of like you did last year, remember? No, that's not her intention. Besides, I seriously doubt that there's anything she could do to faze you all now."

"What does that mean?" Akemi said. "Well Tokyo Cowgirls had improved remarkably since the last prelims," Abigail said. "You've now moved on to be one of country music's favorites."

"Favorites?" I said, shocked. It couldn't be true. Abigail smiled and held out her hand. "Courtney will see you again at the finals. Promise me something. Make it a show that goes down in country music history!"

I hesitated. "Darlene," someone said. "You gotta shake her hand to accept the challenge!"

I nearly overlooked Akemi's presence. I nodded, allowing my hand to find Abigail's. Her hand felt sticky yet warm, and there was something comforting about it.

"Hey, Courtney!" Abigail said to her sister. "Come say hello to everyone!"

Courtney exhaled loudly but didn't say anything. "Courtney?" Still no response.

"It's okay, Abigail," I said, trying to calm things down. "We should let her finish getting ready."

And indeed, we did just that. Before long, Courtney Jones was prepared for her final show at the CMAs in Brentwood, with the Tokyo Cowgirls there to root for her! The stage resonated with the enthusiastic applause of the crowd gathered to support Courtney Jones, Nashville's best country artist.

"Watching from here, we should be able to learn how we appear on stage," Akemi said. "And well as what we can do to entertain the audience."

"Yeah."

"Speaking of Courtney, when is it her turn?"

I reviewed the performance sheet provided by the judge. Luke Bryan had just completed his performance, meaning that Courtney was up next. The stage lights abruptly illuminated, revealing Courtney Jones perched on her stool, holding her guitar close.

‘'It's showtime, y'all!" I shouted, holding my light sticks.

During the show, Courtney fell on stage while performing with the microphone, shocking the audience. Because the CMA had strict rules, she was eliminated from the finals. Once a mistake was made, it was difficult to recover. This could potentially happen to us as well. As a result, Courtney was unable to progress to the final round. Essentially, her journey as a country singer...had come to an end.

Feeling sympathetic towards her, we returned to the changing room to check on Courtney and ensure she was alright. However, Abigail informed us that she had already gone home. To make matters worse, there was going to be a farewell party for the singers who had moved on to the final round. According to Abigail, it appeared that Courtney was in a bit of a disagreement with her parents. I didn't care about the final round anymore. I wanted to help Courtney. I wanted to convince Luke Bryan to give her another chance for her final round.

Courtney remained quiet as always following her disqualification, but I could tell she was suffering profoundly beneath the surface. I have experienced that before, countless times. I excel at holding my tears back. It left her so unsettled that singing was impossible for her.

The journey back to our hotel on the train was filled with silence. Akemi was busy tapping away on her phone, while I sat lost in my thoughts about Courtney's heartbreak. After all, Courtney had been in the spotlight for two years now—since she turned nineteen! It was heartbreaking to witness her in such despair. Perhaps that was the reason behind her overconfident behavior. She had made an error during her final performance at the CMAs, which was her last opportunity to succeed. I contemplated whether it would have been best if we decided against visiting her after all.

"You're still thinking about her, are you?" Akemi said, looking up from her phone. I nodded.

"She has been performing all this time. And she had made a mistake in her last competition, and even had a fight with her parents."

"Even if we feel terrible, there's nothing we can do," Akemi said solemnly. "It's Courtney Jones we're talking about. She'll be okay."

"Yeah," I agreed. "She's really popular, so she'll still be around."

I smiled, my spirits lifted up. "Well then," Akemi said. "Let's go check in at the hotel after this. I heard that it'll clear up tomorrow, so we'll go sightseeing here in Brentwood."

And that we did. The next day, we walked around the streets for hours and hours. We went into neighborhoods I didn't even know existed, looping and zigzagging with no real destination. After a while, we sat on the swings of a giant park even though it was chilly. It smelled like wood chips and wet snow.

"This place is really relaxing, isn't it?" I marveled. "It reminds me of Manhattan," Akemi remarked. "Oh yeah," I said. "This town overlooks the river and there's a scent of rushing water in the air. And there's a school at the top of the hill."

"Yeah," Akemi said, smiling.

Suddenly, my stomach let out a loud rumble, visible enough for Akemi to hear it. It was frustrating how my hunger always interrupted the moments I shared with my best friend.

"Wow!" Akemi laughed. "I suppose you haven't eaten anything but yogurt since you got up."

I blushed, embarrassed. "Sorry. I suppose all that sightseeing made me really hungry."

Akemi smiled. "That makes sense. Well, how about we stop at a cafe? Maybe we could grab some doughnuts or something?"

We walked for a while, until we came across a strange looking cafe on Arnold Road.

*Chocolate Beignets, New Year's Sweets in Southern Brentwood,*

*Caramel Frappuccino.*

Hmm, Caramel Frappuccinos. I wondered if they would be better than Starbucks. I was skeptical, but since I thought that having my tummy full would help me be more energized, I walked in anyway.

"Excuse me," I called as I opened the door. The cafe was quiet, a little too quiet. There was no one there to seat us. "It does say it's open," Akemi said. She suddenly shivered.

"I-I'd at least like to go inside for a little while," she said shakily. "I-I'm freezing to death!"

"I guess it can't be helped," I said, sighing.

"Well then, we're coming in!"

Inside was warm and comforting, so different from outside. There was a fireplace in the lobby. As I hung up my coat on the hat tree, a barely audible noise tickled the inside of my ears. A sniffle?

I tiptoed upstairs, glancing frequently at the posters of Johnny Cash on the walls. Finally, a modern country singer who knew about Johnny Cash. The hallway was empty. I headed towards the bedroom on the right side. When I got to the entrance, I pressed my cheek on the door. I heard the noise again. It was louder this time and I knew instantly what it was. Someone was crying.

I eased the door open slightly and discovered Courtney Jones curled up on her bed, her back facing me and her face buried in her pillow. Her shoulders trembled as she sobbed. *Courtney.*

I hesitated. The first thing I wanted to do was go into her room and hug her and tell her I understood. That's what I would have done with any of my friends in Monroe. But Courtney was different. I wasn't sure how she'd feel if I saw her crying.

By the time I poked my head out of the door, she had already lifted her soggy tear stained face from the pillow and was staring at me, bewildered.

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Abigail turned out to be our waitress at the cafe. She brought us a plate of beignets dusted with a snowfall of powdered sugar and lattes with foam art shaped like a pine tree leaf.

"Wow!" I exclaimed. "It looks really tasty!"

"It'll warm you up pretty good," Abigail said, smiling. "Go ahead and eat up."

"Thank you!" Akemi said. "This is a nice restaurant with a great ambiance."

"I heard that you guys might stop by my sister's college," Abigail said. "But I'm surprised to see you here."

"Yes," I said. "Since we've come all this way, we decided to go sightseeing. And then I got hungry, so we came across this place."

"The scenery is wonderful, too," said Akemi. "With a calm, romantic atmosphere."

I looked out the window and noticed that the snow had stopped falling.

"Thank you very much," Abigail said. "Our family and I love this town. So when we both become adults, we want to take over this restaurant together and live here."

"You do..." Akemi said quietly. "I'm sorry about yesterday," I said. Abigail started to answer, but Courtney interrupted. "If y'all are done eating, hurry up and leave!" she shouted.

Akemi and I exchanged a look. "Courtney!" Abigail said. "Don't speak like that!"

Courtney came up to me and bent down next to my ear. I could feel her hot breath on my face. "If you tell anyone about earlier, I'll make you pay," she whispered. And with that, she turned and headed out of the diner.

"Courtney!" Abigail called, but she was gone.

Abigail turned to us, smiling apologetically. "I'm sorry," she said. "She seems to still be troubled by what happened yesterday."

"Yeah, that's understandable," Akemi said.

"It's okay," said Abigail. "It's the CMA we're talking about. Something like that can happen. I don't have any regrets. So next time, I'm sure Courtney will—"

"No!"

Courtney stormed out of the door, seething with anger. Her face was flushed and spotty from tears.

"I won't change my mind no matter what!" she shouted. "I quit being a country singer! Country music is stupid anyway!"

“Are you really sure?" Abigail said, trying to calm her down. "You've been singing for a long time, since you were twelve. You wouldn't want to throw that away, do you?’’

"I'm sure."

"You'll get another chance next year."

"I no longer want anything to do with the CMAs or country music!" Courtney yelled, making me jump in fear. She erupted in a new wave of tears and ran into her bedroom.

Abigail sighed. "I'm sorry you had to see such an embarrassing scene," Abigail said. "Please enjoy your food."

I shook my head. My stomach felt tight, and I was no longer hungry. I felt all churned up inside, and I didn't know whether to cry or to burst out of the cafe, screaming, "Courtney is quitting being a country singer!"

Abigail sighed again and left us to enjoy our meal. I sat quietly, thinking about what Courtney said. My beignets sat untouched on my plate, already cold.

"Did Courtney say something to you?" Akemi said. "No," I whispered. "I just thought..." My voice came out with long pauses in between. "...that is must be the case...because that's how I feel."

"Darlene.." Akemi said. My bottom lip twitched. "Akemi...Once the final round is over, you too, will be..."

Akemi smiled. "There's nothing we can do about it," she said. "But you were so attracted to being a country singer," I said, struggling to hold back tears. "We worked so hard to be one..."

A tear slid down my cheek. "And yet, it'll be over soon..."

"I am quite satisfied," Akemi whispered. "And with you, Darlene...I was able to be a country singer with you."

A sob broke out of me, and she relented. She put her arm around me and held me close. I shut my eyes and pressed my face into her sweater. I tried to keep my crying to myself.

"We're going to the Grand Ole Opry," Akemi reassured me. "It's like a dream."

"I want to keep singing with you," I whispered. "I want to follow your lead. I want to be right by your side...I want to train hard with you."

I sniffled. "Don't leave me behind."

Akemi's eyes welled up, too. She stroked my hair as I sobbed into her sweater. "You've grown," she said softly. "And you've become even prettier."

"That's..."

Akemi smiled. "What are you going to do after the final round?"

"I don't know..." I said. "We couldn't save my horse farm, and I'll moving out of Monroe and I'll have to leave you and Annabelle behind."

"Yeah.."

"What about you, Akemi?"

Akemi sighed. "Well...I won't know until that time comes. Right now, I'm trying to stay focused on the CMA final round."

I nodded. "That's reasonable."

At that instant, I knew I needed to reach out to Courtney. I recalled Abigail mentioning that she had a disagreement with her parents. Perhaps that was the reason she decided to stop pursuing a career in country music. Unlike Akemi, I empathize with Courtney's emotions deeply. She likely felt that becoming a country singer wouldn't be fulfilling without her parents' support.

My mind wandered back to the song that she had performed last summer.

*Over here in the countryside, I was raised by parents who never let me go...*

So maybe her song was about her parents having high expectations for her as a country singer. Maybe becoming this full-time country singer wasn't her choice after all.

That night, I returned to the café where I first met Abigail, hoping to have a conversation with Courtney. I sensed that if I motivated her to reveal her secret, I might be able to assist her. I spotted Courtney outside the café, putting up the closed sign on the entrance. "Pardon me," I said. Courtney looked at me, wide-eyed. "You..."

I gulped. "I'm Darlene," I said. "Darlene Johnson. I'd like to talk to you. It won't take long."

Courtney looked confused, but said okay. We took a walk around the neighborhood. The streetlights were already on, and the snow that had fallen sparkled in the moonlight. The silence grew like a web around us. At moments like this, the concept of time confused me.

"Hey, how far are we going?" Courtney finally said. "What is that you want to talk about?"

I didn't say anything. "I'm not done with work yet, so I want you to make it quick," she continued.

I stopped walking. "Well, just like you, Miss Jones, I have a father, too."

"You do?" Courtney said, laughing. "What about your mother? Did your parents divorce?"

I shook my head. "No. My mom was killed in a car accident when I was younger."

I recalled the serious expression on Dad's face when he delivered the news when I was little. Although I was too young to have memories of my mom, my dad kept photographs of her to show me.

"Howard Johnson," Courtney pronounced.

I was taken aback. "W-what made you aware of my dad?"

"I looked into your background," Courtney said. "But my dad is the best. He takes me out for ice cream every weekend."

But I wasn't going to fall for her lies. "I think my father is as good as yours."

"But he's a redneck!" Courtney said, laughing. "All your father does is smoke weed and walk around without his shirt on."

I felt anger rising up inside me, and normally I hardly got this angry. "But he's so good at taking care of horses that he owns a ranch!" I said loudly. "And he can cook Southern Stir-Fry, too!"

"Those things have nothing to do with being a country singer!" Courtney shouted.

"That's not true!" I said. "Those basics needed are the same!"

"But my father is better than yours!" Courtney shot back.

I tried to calm myself down and be more understanding. "You really love your father so much."

Courtney's face turned red. She started sputtering. "O-of course! I mean...Why wouldn't I?! And what's with you?! You're usually so full of yourself!"

I smiled. "Because I love my father so much."

Courtney looked at me, shocked. I continued, "And after talking to him, I learned that he's happy."

"About what?"

I started walking again. "Even if Dad and I aren't doing things together, if I work hard and achieve something without his help, it makes him happy. And I think your father probably feels the same way."

"I know that much," Courtney said. Her voice cracked. I looked back at her, concerned. "Courtney?"

"That's why I've been trying hard," she said. "I wanted to show him that I'll be okay without him and that he doesn't have to worry."

She paused. "And yet..." She started to tear up. "When it was my last chance to win..."

She suddenly began to cry. "I failed! That's what I did. Are you happy?!"

I felt sorrier for her than I'd ever felt for anybody in my life. I wondered if I was really stuck up. I hoped not. Maybe Courtney had just said that because she was angry.

I took her hands and gave her a squeeze. "Then you can just make sure it's not the last performance, right?" I said.

Courtney seemed bewildered but also moved by what I said. I giggled and began to drag her away from the café. Courtney trailed after me, breathless.

"Where are we going?" she gasped. "You'll see!" I said happily.

We stopped at the center of the pavement. I looked up, and a giant Christmas tree with a plethora of shiny ornaments lit up the night sky, towering over us.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" I said. Courtney hesitated. But just when I thought she was going to say something snarky, she smiled. She actually smiled. It was a small smile, but then it got bigger and bigger. She moved closer to me, and I felt a feathery warmth on my fingers. Our hands next to each other by our sides, pinkies touching. Did she know it? Did she feel the energy sparking between us, like I did?

I edged my hand closer, and her hand slid over mine and closed around it, just like that. I could hardly breathe. "Darlene," she whispered. "You're more captivating in real life than on screen."

*Hang on a minute. Did Courtney say I was captivating to her??? Holy freaking crap!!!!*

I mustered the courage to propose that we sing a song together. Courtney appeared confused. "Let's create a song in honor of our fathers! Under this beautiful light!"

Courtney smiled once more. "You really are a true weirdo, you know?" she remarked, this time with a hint of affection. "Not as much as you!" I replied, laughing. We embraced each other tightly.

**Let's Sing Together!**

I was meant to meet Courtney at her café to talk about our plans for the concert, but nerves were creeping in. What if Courtney went back to being a cold-hearted diva? What if she changed her mind and didn't want to do the duet with me? To ease my anxiety, I asked Akemi if she would come along to support me, and she said yes. Having my best friend for support made me feel a little better. As we sat at a nearby Starbucks, Courtney shot us a menacing look while sipping her iced mocha. Her vivid purple eyes burned with intensity. A sense of discomfort washed over me. What was bothering her this time?

"You didn't tell me that the pink-haired girl would come, too."

"But Akemi is very dependable, so..."

"I don't care," Courtney grumbled. "I'm not really someone who likes hanging out with people."

I was taken aback. Why didn't she enjoy spending time with others? In contrast, I thrived on socializing. In fact, when I was a child—specifically at six years old—I was quite the social butterfly. I wasn't aware of that label and didn't aspire to be one; it just came naturally. I loved being around people, especially kids my age, and I had no qualms about approaching other children at the playground and saying, "Hey! Want to play horses? We can invent our own horse names, like Starry Sunshine. That's the name I gave my horse. What's yours?"

I often wore my worn-out overalls and boots, while the girls I approached typically sported adorable hairstyles and nice outfits. At that age, I despised wearing dresses and looking fancy, so my wardrobe consisted mostly of overalls, t-shirts, and ripped jeans. As a teenager, I had become more accustomed to wearing dresses, but I still leaned toward pants and t-shirts (after all, I am a country girl).

However, back then, those differences didn’t matter. I realized that in hindsight, I may have seemed scruffier than the average little girl, but that was only apparent when I looked at my second-grade class photos.

Regardless, in those days, I would simply smile, place my hands on my hips, and wait for someone to appreciate the splendor of Starry Sunshine the horse. Most of the time, they did, and off we would go, linking arms, and everything felt so effortless. If they didn’t, I would seek out someone with better taste. No biggie.

Akemi sighed. "I don't like to either."

Courtney sighed, too. "I'm pretty much...like that at college."

Akemi and I exchanged looks. Here was another introvert.

"My manager is usually the one who comes up with the lyrics and music," Courtney continued. "We haven't said anything yet," I said.

Akemi bit into her donut and chewed thoughtfully. "In any case," she said with her mouth full. "There's no twist or anything. It's kind of too straightforward."

Courtney looked confused.

"But it gives us an idea of what kind of song you want to sing, Courtney," I said. "I'll help you, so let's create a song together."

"But you guys have to prepare for the CMA final round, right?"

Her eyes widened. "Can you afford the time to create a song with me?"

"Well..."

I took a moment to collect my thoughts. Was it truly wise to neglect preparing for the final round of creating a song with Courtney? Collaborating with a well-known country artist had always been a dream of mine, so retracting my words from last night would only make me feel worse.

"Darlene wants to help you no matter what, Courtney," Akemi said.

I frowned thoughtfully. "After talking to you and my father, I thought that maybe we should show them that we can thrive creatively so that they'll trust us more without having to worry about us."

Suddenly, my phone vibrated. It was a text from my father inquiring about my whereabouts and reminding me to prepare to head home.

"Wow!" I exclaimed. "Is it really that late?" Two women shot us annoyed looks from a nearby table. I hadn't noticed that I had been at the café for more than four hours. Crap, my father was going to be furious. I quickly said goodbye to Courtney and hurried back to the train station to let my dad know about my plans.

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"You're staying?!" My father exclaimed over the phone after I told him what was happening. "That's right," I said quietly. "I met this really cool country singer in Brentwood, and she is feeling very sad, so I'd like to cheer her up."

"That's right," Akemi chimed in. "She's super-mega bummed out. We can't leave her like that."

"Where are you staying?" Dad asked.

"Fortunately, Courtney's room is big enough for all of us, so we'll stay there."

"Who's Courtney?" Dad sounded confused.

"She's the country singer I met in Nashville," I explained. "She had a huge loss in the CMAs, so I want to help her overcome her failure."

"I-I see."

"I'm sorry, Dad," I said. "I'll definitely be back in two or three days."

Dad sighed. "I don't really care either way."

"I think it's fine," Akemi said. "I'm sure the country singers have a lot to talk about amongst themselves, right?"

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Courtney allowed us to use her café to go over our song plans, and we couldn’t have been happier. Spending three whole days with the best country singer in America? What could possibly top that?! Her bedroom turned out to be smaller than I had imagined. I had expected something grand, akin to the Chiharu sisters' beach house. Instead, it featured a twin bed on the left side, a corner bookshelf, and walls adorned with posters of Luke Bryan. Finally, someone who shared my appreciation for Luke Bryan!

"You’re welcome to make yourselves comfortable," Courtney said. "Just don’t touch—"

As soon as she uttered that, my eyes were already drawn to her guitar hanging on the wall. It was a beautiful mint green and emitted a fresh wood aroma. I picked it up, and it felt perfect nestled in my arms.

It was Courtney Jones' guitar. Just as I was about to strum a chord, Courtney quickly dashed over and snatched it away from me.

"Stop!" she shouted. "Don't touch it without asking!"

"A guitar?" Akemi said. Courtney sighed. "Yes," she said. "I got it on my 12th birthday. It was a gift from my father because he knew how much I loved singing. The moment I decided to become a country singer, I wanted it to symbolize how far I've come as a performer at the CMA."

Her voice cracked, and her eyes welled up. "And yet...when it was my last performance..."

I smiled. "It's nice," I said. Courtney gasped, but she quickly snapped out of it. "O-of course it is! My father gave it to me. He's way better than your stupid redneck father."

"That's not true!" I shouted. "My father gave me a guitar for my birthday too, and it's just as good as yours." I refrained from saying that the guitar I got for my birthday was better than Courtney's so that I wouldn't anger her more.

Courtney got up in my face. "The guitar that my father gave me is infinitely times better than your raggedy-ass guitar from your stupid redneck father," she said. Her breath smelled like honey. Splotches of red mottled her skin and I could see every fleck of color in her eyes.

I started to yell back again, but stopped myself and looked back at Akemi. I thought she would cry or run out of the room, but instead she looked amazed, maybe even envious.

"I've never seen you..." she whispered. "...this aggressive before."

I gulped. "So do you... know now?"

"You may be right," Courtney said. She flashed me a smile. Feeling shy, I smiled back. "Friends?" I said. Courtney hesitated, and said, "Friends."

All of a sudden, we heard a knock at the door. A tall man who I guessed to be Courtney's dad peeked in.

"Y'all sure ya really don't have to go back?" he said briskly in his thick Southern drawl. "Not really," I said confidently. "We're fine."

"I'm sorry that we came barging in so suddenly," Akemi said. "That ain't a problem for us at all," her dad said. "Well then, I'll let y'all know when dinner is ready."

We nodded.

He waved, and quietly shut the door, leaving us alone with Courtney. The three of us sat there in awkward silence for several seconds. I looked at Courtney's guitar and tried to think of something to say, but my mind was blank.

"You might be right," I said finally. Courtney looked at me, confused. "I've been thinking lately that though I may appear like I have everything as a country singer in the eyes of the CMA, I may have lots of hidden powers."

"Then, it's decided!" Akemi said, pumping her fist into the air.

"What is?"

She smiled. "The theme of the song, of course!"

So eventually we went with that. After we showered and changed into our pajamas, Courtney and I stayed up late coming up with new images and wordplay for our duet together while Akemi reclined on her bed playing *Genshin Impact* on her phone.

"Once I've decided to my best..." Courtney read what I had written on the paper. "The next line is I won't break down," I said. "Do it this way..."

"Then..."

"We'd finish off with.." I quickly wrote down the outline. *Always stay loving, chick...*

I handed the lyrics sheet to Courtney, who examined it intently. I waited anxiously, fearing she would criticize it as she had during our first CMA performance in Nashville. Just when I was least prepared, a bright smile broke out on her face. "Wow!" she exclaimed. "This is really good!"

We looked at each other and started laughing. "This will show the CMAs what I'm made of!" Courtney said happily. "Yes!" I said.

Courtney spread out her arms in a hug. I hesitated. *Whoa, whoa, hold on. Courtney hugging me????*

"Don't leave me hanging," she exclaimed. I grinned, and we embraced for what felt like an eternity. I struggled to put her scent into words; it was fresh and sweet, reminiscent of flowers.

"Let's hope we can sign up for the event," Courtney suggested after we finally released each other.

"What event?" I asked, a bit perplexed.

"The CMA Country Christmas Event, silly!" Courtney replied, laughing.

Oh my gosh, I had completely lost track of that! The CMA Country Christmas Event was an annual showcase where the biggest names in country music came together to perform both new original songs and beloved Christmas classics on stage. Tokyo Cowgirls would be sharing the stage with Dierks Bentley, Lady A, Martina McBride, Keith Urban, and of course, Courtney Jones. It would truly be a dream come true!

Unfortunately, we needed to present the content of the Christmas event to the board so they could determine if our duet would be appropriate. I felt confident about it, but Courtney admitted that she struggled with conversing with unfamiliar people. I made an effort to set aside my own excitement in order to connect with Courtney.

"You can do it," I said. "Remember, I'll be cheering you on. Otherwise it'll be meaningless."

The announcer came on. "Next country artists, please come in."

"You ready?" I said to Courtney. Courtney hesitated, and then nodded. "I guess."

The two of us walked towards the radio broadcast room with an open mind. Well, one of us with an open mind. Courtney and I would no longer have to seek approval from our fathers any more. We were going to make our own decisions and do everything by ourselves!

We entered the room and came face to face with the Christmas board staff. They all were wearing dark suits and had serious expressions on their faces. They all looked very official. Most of them didn't look very friendly.

I heard Courtney hyperventilating. I put her hand on her back to soothe her. "It's okay," I said. "We'll do this together."

I cleared my throat. "Hello?"

One of the hosts looked up. I expected her to look sour, but she actually looked surprised. But she didn't say anything. Maybe she was speechless that Courtney and I were together as country singers. The room was quiet. I could feel their stares hitting my face. The silence was terrible. The clock on the mantel ticked off the minutes.

I saw Courtney's lips twitch. "I-I..., no, I mean, we...Um..."

The hosts glared at us. I knew we should say something, and we should say it now, or they would kick us out.

"Dad..."

Flashbacks began to flood my brain. I remember when I was really young, like three, and me and my father were playing tag at the park. I was giggling and squealing while trying to escape from my Dad's outstretched arms as he chased me around, trying to tackle me and eat me up like a monster. The grass was green, the sky was blue, and we were having a great time.

Then, suddenly, I tripped and fell face first into the grass. I had a bruise on my forehead, and I was wailing loudly, my butt perched on the ground. Dad laughed. "You are such a crybaby, Darlene," he had said affectionately. He knelt down next to me. "You're a strong girl, aren't you, pumpkin? Now, show me your courage, sweetheart."

He lifted up my bangs, and kissed my forehead. I gulped, sniffed, and finally stopped crying, touched by his tenderness. That memory gave me courage to speak up, and soon enough, the words came flooding from my mouth.

"Right. My father, Howard Oliver Johnson, has been giving me courage all this time," I said. "I grew up in Monroe, Georgia on a horse farm owned by my father all my life. I'm from Tokyo Cowgirls, along with my best friend Akemi Chiharu. Although Courtney Jones and I live far apart, the two of us would like to sing a new song hand in hand for this Christmas event."

Courtney smiled, encouraged by my speech. "A song that we dedicate to the ones we love…''

....

It turned out better than we anticipated. Courtney was finally able to express how her father instilled courage in her, and the hosts allowed us to perform a duet for the Christmas event. Once we returned to Courtney's apartment, I chose to email my father to see if he could come to Brentwood for the performance. He was thrilled to accept and would certainly like to assist us with that.

The following day, Akemi, Courtney, and I visited the WWBA Radio Station studios to make an announcement about our upcoming performance. Courtney remained anxious, but Akemi and I assured her that we would be there for support.

"Today, we have the performers for the Christmas Festival," Luke Bryan announced. "Um..." He trailed off.

"Courtney Jones and Darlene Johnson," Courtney finished, glancing doubtfully at me.

"They came to say hello!" Luke said.

"We'll hold a concert on Christmas Eve," I said into the microphone. I tapped on Akemi. "Ah! *Onegai*—I mean, come, *kudasai*—!"

She cleared her throat and tried again. "I mean, please come, *onegai*...! Uh..."

Time eventually ran out, and then we got kicked out of the recording studio by Luke. At least Courtney and I were able to make our announcement.

"Aww," Akemi groaned. "I screwed up."

I giggled. "It's all right, Akemi."

We were about to reach the exit, but then we were stopped by two girls wearing navy blue blazers, light blue plaid skirts, and purple ties. They didn't seem pleased to see us. Courtney gasped. She blinked hard.

"Um..."

"Who are they?" Akemi said. "My classmates," Courtney mumbled, and ducked behind me. She sniffled. "Hey, why are you hiding?" I said. "They’re your friends."

"Because I've never really talked to them," Courtney whispered. The recording studio was quiet. The two college girls glanced at each other, unsure what to say. Finally one of the girls spoke up. She had long, curly blonde hair with green eyes. She reminded me of Caroline, only Caroline had straight hair.

"Courtney Jones will be performing at the CMA Finals!"

"Yes!" I said. "Courtney will perform!"

Courtney gasped. "What did you just say?!"

The curly-blonde haired girl's friend spoke up, too. "Is it okay if we come to see it, too?"

Courtney finally let go of me and stepped toward her classmates. "What...? Um, sure."

She fiddled with her fingers and tried to find the right words to say. I felt bad for her. I knew what it was like to screw up the CMA regional prelims. Tokyo Cowgirls did it last summer, too. I remember I wanted to stay strong for the duo and not break down crying. Crying would only drag down our morale. But my feelings had built up more and more and finally, it cascaded out of me. Courtney might have done the same thing, too.

"I know it's late," Courtney said. "But I'm sorry about the CMA regional prelims."

"No worries." The blonde haired girl looked serious. "We're sorry that we couldn't come to see your performance. We thought you didn't like us. We know that you and your manager worked hard for all of us."

Courtney looked confused.

"Courtney Jones, you are our pride, actually, the pride of our whole college. You'll be performing in the Christmas Festival, right?"

Courtney glanced at me. Her eyes were wet now. I had only seen her cry three times before—the day she was calling us out for not taking the CMA Awards seriously, right after she lost at her final performance, and while she shared how she felt she had to let her father down for her last CMAs.

"Yes," she whispered shakily. "I will be performing."

She lowered her face into her hands and began to cry. She tried to keep her weeping sounds to herself, but I could still hear her sniffing loudly. I started crying too, feeling proud that my new band mate was finally opening up to her classmates.

"Why are you crying?" Courtney said as she dried her eyes with her wrist. "I wonder why..." I thought of what else to say. "I feel happy, but the waterworks just come out."

Later that evening, Courtney and I met up alone at the park so we could make our prayers for our upcoming concert together. The Christmas lights were already hanging above the buildings, making it look very festive. ‘Tis the season to be jolly indeed! I enjoyed being alone with the greatest country singer in all of America. Maybe Courtney wasn't so bad after all.

While we were enjoying the chilly breeze, two men approached us. Initially, I didn’t think I knew them, but then I spotted my father’s beard and hazel eyes. It seemed Courtney also recognized her dad. Without hesitation, we hurried toward them and eagerly extended the concert invitations to our fathers.

Dad looked surprised. "What is this?"

"It's your Christmas present," Courtney explained. "Darlene and I will hold a concert on Christmas Eve..."

"On the stage we created by ourselves using everything you taught me..." I finished.

Dad's eyes welled up. I don't think I ever saw my dad cry before, not counting the day my mom died when I was eight. Courtney's dad had tears in his eyes, too. I guess we made our fathers proud after all.

"We want you two to see how far we were able to come..."

"By ourselves..." Courtney finished. Dad's nose got red. He looked at me all soft and gooey. When I thought about it, I realized that I had never collaborated with a mainstream country singer before. Dad seeing me with Courtney might have warmed his heart.

"Pardon me!" A cheerful Southern voice exclaimed. I turned around, and to my surprise and delight, there was Annabelle, Sora, and Akemi along with their parents standing on the balcony of Courtney's apartment. Annabelle winked and waved at me. I waved back.

"Annabelle! Everyone...!"

"You're here, too?" Courtney exclaimed, delighted.

"Papa said he'd pay for the plane tickets, so we all went together," Annabelle explained.

"And you're going to watch us perform?" My eyes were so wide I could feel my eyebrows way up past my bangs. I was smiling so hard that my cheeks felt like cherries.

"Of course!" Akemi said, loving every second of my reaction. "There's no way that we'd miss an event like this!"

"That's my little sis!" Sora exclaimed happily. "Such a big heart!"

Dad completely lost it. He bubbled up with tears and grabbed Courtney's father by the arms. I think Courtney's dad might have been sniffing back a couple of tears himself. But he has seen it all.

"Dad..." Courtney whispered. At the same time, we both asked our fathers if they would watch the concert we were creating. Dad wiped his tears with a hankie. Then, when I least expected it, he spread out his arms in a hug. Courtney's dad did the same. At the same time, Courtney and I ran towards our fathers, who both embraced us in a hug. *Our fathers.* It was like one of those old movies where two lovers run to each other in slow motion.

I breathed in the smell of my Dad's cologne, feeling warm and safe and protected by my loving and caring father. "I'll be happy too," he whispered tenderly. "I love you so much, Darly Chick. I'm so proud of you."

While in our fathers' arms, Courtney and I winked at each other. Then, simultaneously, they lifted up our bangs and kissed our foreheads, just like Dad had done when I was younger. His breath smelled like peppermints.

"Dad!" Courtney said. Our fathers looked confused. "We'll shine with everything we have!" I said. "Please watch it!"

"Merry Christmas!" we both exclaimed together.

Tokyo Cowgirls, along with Courtney Jones eventually came together to perform our new song *Gift of Love* at the Christmas Event in Nashville.

The concert was very successful, and everyone supported us. Afterwards, Courtney told her father that she would quit being a solo country artist and that she would support Tokyo Cowgirls, and Akemi and I told her that she would be more than welcome to do so.

**Can We Shine?**

I could remember all the way back when I was younger when I tried to wish on a shooting star with Annabelle and Akemi. We had taken a ferry across the Altamaha River, on the lookout for asteroids zooming across the earth, on their way to end humanity that were mistaken by us little kids for meteoroids. Disembarking from the ferry, we hurried to the riverbank and scanned the sky for falling stars. But we didn't find any, not even regular stars.

"Where can we see the stars more clearly?" Annabelle asked. I glanced and found a nearby deck that looked out over the river. I thought that if we were to stand on the deck, maybe we would have a better view.

"Over there!"

We rushed past the picnic tables and came to a stop near the stairs that led to the deck. "Which direction?" Akemi asked.

"Let's go up here!" I exclaimed, and happily ran up to the deck. Akemi and Annabelle followed me, anticipating the thought of witnessing asteroids zooming towards the earth.

But when we finally reached the deck, we were met with an unfortunate sight. The night sky was nowhere to be seen, replaced by dreary sad clouds piling up like snow. The air smelled like metal, the promise of rain.

"Oh no..." Akemi said sadly. All of a sudden, a drop of water hit my eye. I looked up, and it had started raining — only a little bit. Raindrops dotted the planks underneath my feet, and tears began to stream down my face.

"Oh no..." Annabelle whispered sadly. "We ain't gonna be making a wish like this! Ain't no way..."

Tears welled in my eyes, a culmination of our long trek and the realization that we wouldn't see shooting stars; all our effort seemed wasted. Akemi and Annabelle, their own eyes brimming with tears, embraced me, their promise ringing clear: no matter the circumstances, we would always face them together.

On my night table sat photos of us from the ferry, the river bathed in the glow of the setting sun, the air alive with the scent of rushing water.

I promised myself that after I had moved out of Monroe, I would never forget my two best friends. May we be together forever.

.....

After Tokyo Cowgirls' performance with Courtney Jones in Brentwood, Akemi and I encouraged Courtney to travel back with us back to Monroe so she could visit my horse farm. We thought that maybe, just maybe, she would get to warm up with Annabelle and Sora, just like she warmed up with her classmates from college.

It was freezing outside, since it was now January, the start of a new year. One of my New Year's resolutions was to take the CMA Awards more seriously, just like Courtney did. As she said, the CMAs were not a game. I would make sure of that.

We approached Monroe with an open mind. Courtney was still a little worried, but Akemi and I reassured her that Annabelle and Sora were really nice and that they wouldn't hurt a fly. Funny enough, Courtney mistook Annabelle for the creepy doll from the *Conjuring film* series. I laughed and told her that Annabelle was really sweet and nothing like the blood-thirsty doll.

We pulled up to the old dirt road near my horse farm. I rolled down the window. "Thanks for waiting!" I called out cheerfully. Akemi rolled her window down. "Happy new year," she said.

"Holy pickles!" Annabelle exclaimed. "They really came after all!"

"Got a problem with that?" Courtney said bitterly. *Sugar and ice,* said a voice inside of me.

We dusted off our guitars and gave Courtney a quick tour of the horse stables. Courtney almost freaked out when one of the horses tried to lick her gently, which I thought was kinda funny. I guess Courtney never rode a horse in her whole life.

"Where's your spirit?" Courtney asked.

"Well it's New Year's, so..."

Courtney sighed and mellowed out. "You've got a nice horse farm, I suppose. Tell me something I don't know."

"Yeah!" I said. "We can see the river, too."

Annabelle spoke up. "Though Darlene's horse farm won't be around much longer."

"'The horses will be transferred to a different ranch and Darlene will have to move out of Monroe," Akemi explained. "So March will be when they will start clearing out the stables."

Courtney looked shocked. "But if you do well in the CMAs and can get more horseback riders..."

I sighed. "Yeah...That's how we felt for a long time, but..."

Courtney smiled gently. "I didn't know that."

I smiled, too. "But our fans told us that they want us to perform at the Grand Ole Opry so that my horse farm will become part of country music history."

"People will know that the country singers from Monroe, Georgia performed at the Grand Ole Opry," Sora said. "And that this horse farm existed here."

"You couldn't ask for better friends that!" Courtney exclaimed happily. "How wonderful!"

I couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or not, but I enjoyed the sound of her reaction. Her face then became more serious. "Well then, I won't hold you back."

Akemi and I glanced at each other, shocked. Was this a new side of Courtney that we had never seen before?

"I'm sorry I was harsh to you before," she said quietly. "I want you guys to win the Grand Ole Opry, okay? I'll even help you guys train as hard as I can. I won't hold back!"

"Seriously?"'

"Seriously." Courtney smirked.

With that said, we invited Courtney for guitar practice in the barn with Annabelle and Sora coaching us. We had to practice even harder now that we would get to perform at the Grand Ole Opry soon!

Courtney thought that if we were to have a tighter guitar session, we would somehow make a connection with the audience. If we were able to convey the feelings we had right now to the audience organically, then we would perform precisely.

As we practiced our guitars, I could feel a pang of sadness weighing me down. I didn't know why, but then I remembered. Only three more months until they would start to clear out the stables and I would pack up my things and move out of Monroe. And then... I'd have to start a new life in the city. The thought of living in the city made me want to throw up.

Eventually, it was time for Courtney to head back to Brentwood. We all piled in my car to drive Courtney to the airport to say goodbye.

"I wish you could stay here a bit longer," I said sadly.

"There's another place I'm stopping by," Courtney reassured me. "So..."

"Another place!"

Courtney went up to me and thrusted a note card with scribbly writing all over it. "Here... It's the practice plan that my sister and I came up with."

"Thanks a lot," I said, and claimed it from her.

"You're going to win the CMAs, right?" Courtney declared. "You'll need to do at least that much."

I felt like the world was spinning. What was she talking about?

"This event isn't just about making a memory for you, right?"

Her eyes widened. "Win no matter what," she said. "I believe in you."

After Courtney left for Brentwood, Akemi and I drove back to the river to have a private conversation. The last light of day finally faded out into darkness as we walked towards the creek. The water

shimmered in the dimming light, reflecting the bare trees. Sitting on a brown log, we smiled at each other, our faces flushed from the cold air. But something made the smile on Akemi's face fade.

"It's less than three months, huh?"

"Right after our Grand Ole Opry is over, I'll be moving out of Monroe," I said sadly. ‘’When spring comes, there’ll be no riding horses together into the sunset, or fishing on weekends.’’

I ran towards the creek, picked up a pebble, and tossed it into the river, watching the ripples expand. We were silent for a few minutes. Finally Akemi spoke up.

"What will happen to Tokyo Cowgirls....after you move out of Monroe?"

"I don't know," I said, my head lowered. "I really haven't thought about it. The CMAs are over... Until we know the results of the finals, I somehow feel that I shouldn't think about what comes after that."

"For everyone's sake?" Akemi sounded confused.

"We'll perform by putting our hearts and souls into the CMA finals and win," I said with a smile. "We'll find the shine that we've been seeking all this time."

I turned to Akemi, determination pulsing through my body. "I think it's the way to show our gratitude to everyone in this small town, as well as Courtney."

Akemi giggled, and ran over to me. She cupped my face in her hands and looked straight into my eyes.

"Wh-what are you doing to me?"

"I couldn't agree more," Akemi said happily. We both laughed, and then got quiet.

‘’I decided that it’s best for us to follow our own paths,’’ I finally said, my voice trembling slightly. ‘’But.. It’s hard, Akemi. We’ve always done everything together.’’

Akemi watched as my eyes glistened with tears. ‘’What are you going to do?’’

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot. I want to make a wish, you know? A real one. One that’ll keep us connected, no matter where we go.” I glanced towards the distance.

Akemi thought for a moment. “Tonight, the stars are supposed to be beautiful. We could go for a nighttime drive to wish upon them.’’

‘’Akemi…’’ I began, unsure of how to respond. The thought of driving through the chilled night air while under the stars felt surreal yet melancholy. ‘’That sounds… really special.’’

‘’I want you to come,’’ Akemi said, her voice firming up. ‘’You’re my best friend. I need you there.’’

And so it was decided. As the sun dipped fully below the horizon and night began to envelop Monroe, I found myself behind the wheel of my candy-apple red *Ford* with Akemi behind me. The two of us exchanged glances, our eyes reflecting a silent conversation between us that made my heart ache. I’ve always admired our bond, two souls wrapped tightly in one another’s lives, facing the dark future side by side.

We drove out towards the edges of the town, where the glow of streetlights faded out to black, and the world was painted by shadows. I directed Akemi towards a quaint old hill overlooking the vast expanse of the night sky. As we parked, the two of us stepped out. The cold night air bit our cheeks, yet it felt magical.

‘’This is it,’’ I said, excitement layering itself over my trembling voice. Together we ran up the hill, laughter bubbling up as we stumbled slightly above the uneven ground, fueled by nervous anticipation rather than dread.

Finally, I lay back on the cool grass, gazing up at the stars, pinpricks of light scattered across the canvas of the night. Akemi sat on my left. ‘’Okay,’’ I said, my voice low. ‘’On the count of three, we each make our wish.’’

‘’Wait,’’ Akemi said suddenly, her brow furrowing. ‘’What if it doesn’t come true?’’

‘’Then we’ll keep wishing until it does,’’ I said with conviction. ‘’Ready?’’

Akemi nodded. I counted down. ‘’One… two… three!’’

With our eyes closed, hearts racing, we made our silent wishes -- Akemi’s hopes of staying connected, and mine was more of a personal wish for my friends; that they would find happiness, no matter where life led them.

After a minute, I opened my eyes. I caught glimpses of falling stars gliding from the sky, reminders that even in the vastness of the universe, our hearts could hold each other close.

‘’Did you see that?’’ I squealed, my eyes wide.

‘’That was so beautiful!’’ Akemi replied, beaming with energy that made my heart flutter. We looked at each other and began to laugh, because it was.

**A Country Girl's Fate**

The smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the Starbucks where I sat with Akemi. The sun lazily warmed the world outside, painting the scene with an orange hue. But the warmth didn't reach my heart. Something heavy hung in the air, something unspoken, gnawing at the edges of our impending conversation. We were waiting for the café rush to settle, but mostly, we were stalling.

The two of us had been inseparable since we became Tokyo Cowgirls, and though it had only been a year since we first performed together, it felt like a lifetime. However, the warmth of our shared dreams turned cold with the reality of my upcoming move to Atlanta. I was leaving Monroe, a bittersweet departure that tangibly threatened to unravel the bonds we had built.

"I mean, you guys could totally keep going without me!" I had finally said.

"I can't imagine being Tokyo Cowgirls without you," Akemi said, fiddling with my coffee cup. "We promised we wouldn't talk about this until after CMAs, you know that."

Akemi hardly spoke but I could see the conflict across her features. A part of me hoped she would join me in fighting for what we had, but she had become the kind of person who weighed words heavily before giving them breath. Finally, she met my gaze and shook her head slowly.

"I can't picture another version of Tokyo Cowgirls," Akemi whispered. "We've always been a duo."

Our dream had been to enter the CMAs and make it big, but could Akemi achieve that without me? The thought of continuing without her made my stomach churn. I wanted nothing more than to join the Tokyo Cowgirls, but I couldn't bring myself to ask for something I knew would hurt the duo. After a long silence, I took a breath and said, "Maybe…it's time for a change."

‘’Darlene?’’ Akemi asked, her eyebrows knitting together in concern.

“I mean, what I’m trying to say is…maybe I shouldn’t join Tokyo Cowgirls. Maybe I should stick to being a solo country singer instead,” I replied, keeping my voice steady despite the tremor in my heart. “The true value of what we created is in the two of us, not just in me.”

Her soft smile faltered, and I felt the weight of that concession settle over the table. We’d always celebrated our individuality, but somehow, coming back together felt like a necessary rite of passage—one that we were now unraveling.

After the decision hung in the air, Akemi suggested we spend the day together to relax and breathe before everything changed. Each of us picked a place to go: I chose the vintage record store with its walls lined with nostalgic vinyls; Akemi selected the art gallery where we’d found our rare inspiration, and finally, I chose the old arcade, a staple of our childhood.

It was definitely a day to remember. We laughed, reminiscing about the moments we shared at each place, even as the shadow of farewell loomed over us.

As the sun began its descent, I announced my choice: “I want us to watch the sunset together at the beach.”

The beach was quiet, the waves lapping gently against the sand, as we sat side by side, framed by a backdrop of fiery orange and soft lavender. It was an idyllic scene, one I had imagined over and over in our Tokyo Cowgirls dream. But today, it felt different.

As the sun dipped closer to the horizon, I took a deep breath, her gaze still locked on the fading ball of fire. “You know, I was thinking…” I began, her voice cracking ever so slightly. “After I move out…maybe it’s time we disband Tokyo Cowgirls for good.”

“What?” Akemi managed to stammer. “But—”

“Akemi, we promised we wouldn’t talk about it during CMAs,” I interrupted softly. “And you’re right; we’ve been amazing as a duo. But without me, things wouldn’t be the same. I don’t want you to pretend otherwise.”

Akemi glanced between the two of us, eyes glistening with unshed tears, the detangling of our dreams reflected in the breeze. “Darlene, you’re more than a member of this group. You’re part of who we are. But I agree…if it’s meant to be, maybe we should do this in peace.”

More tears followed my confession as her chin quivered, but she nodded. “I want us to celebrate our final performance for what it was. Let’s make sure it’s something special, and then we can all move on,” she said decisively.

The two of us remained silent as the sun vanished into the sea, leaving behind traces of color that danced on the waves, a beautiful goodbye to a vibrant past.

That evening, we returned home and made preparations for our final performance under the stars, the luminous glow of our friendship paling in comparison to the brilliance of our shared laughter and dreams. Plans morphed into songs, and songs into moments we would carry in our hearts forever.

As the lights dimmed on the performance stage, I took a breath, facing the crowd alongside us. This wouldn’t end with sadness; it would echo in our hearts like the chords we strummed.

Goodbyes are never truly the end, I realized — they are an opportunity for new beginnings. And as our voices harmonized into the night, I knew that whatever paths we chose, we'd have this moment to carry with us, a final chord that rang through the air, a love letter to our shared journey.

**Tailgate Party!**

The neon lights of Nashville flickered against the night sky, casting a vibrant glow over the streets as we stepped out of the cab. Akemi's eyes sparkled with excitement, her hand brushing against the rough brick wall of the Country Music Hall of Fame.

“Darlene, can you believe we’re finally here?” she breathed, her voice bursting with enthusiasm.

“Right?” I grinned, already feeling the electric pulse of the city. “It’s like a dream.”

As we entered the Hall, the warmth enveloped us, a stark contrast to the cool night outside. The air was heavy with the scent of polished wood and the faintest hint of nostalgia. I could almost hear echoes of past legends in the walls.

“Look!” Akemi pointed towards a display. “They’ve got prayers for the Tokyo Cowgirls!”

I squinted at the framed notes, each one filled with hope and encouragement. “Wow, people really believe in us.” It felt surreal, the weight of their hopes pressing down on me like a warm blanket.

“Darlene!” A voice sliced through the air, sharp and familiar.

Courtney Jones strutted over, her confidence radiating like the sequins on her jacket. “So, you two are really serious about this CMA thing?”

“Of course,” I shot back, crossing my arms. “What about you, Courtney? Are you still trying to ride on everyone else’s coattails?”

Akemi stifled a laugh, and I shot her a look to keep it together.

Courtney rolled her eyes. “Please. I’ve got my own sound, thank you very much. But I just want to know if you actually want to win. Or is this just a big joke?”

I felt my heart race. “We’re here to win, Courtney. Just like you.”

Her smirk widened. “See you on stage then. Try not to trip over your own dreams.”

As she walked away, Akemi whispered, “Do you think she really wants to win?”

“Who cares?” I shrugged. “Let’s focus on us.”

We wandered deeper into the Hall, absorbing everything around us.

“You know,” Akemi said softly, “I’ve been thinking. Do we really want to win?”

I glanced at her, taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, it’s the CMAs. It’s huge, but…what if we don’t?” She picked at her nails, a nervous habit she had.

I took a deep breath, my thoughts tangled. “I want this. More than anything. But I think we’re here for more than just the trophy. It’s about our music, our story.”

She nodded, her eyes brightening. “Right. It’s about making a mark. But…what if we don’t win? What if we’re just…not good enough?”

“Akemi, stop.” I grabbed her shoulders, feeling the resolve surge through me. “We are good enough. We’ve worked too hard to let doubt creep in now.”

“Okay,” she said, her smile returning. “But I just want to make sure we’re on the same page. This isn’t just about fame for me.”

“I know,” I replied, my voice firm. “It’s about our dreams. And I’m not giving up on that.”

We left the Hall, the night air cool against our skin, but the fire within us burned bright.

“Tomorrow is the big day,” Akemi said, her voice bubbling with excitement. “I can’t wait to take the stage!”

“Me neither,” I admitted, a thrill coursing through me. “Let’s go back to the spot where it all began.”

The next morning, the sun bathed Nashville in golden light, and we made our way to the bus station where we saw the CMA ad. My heart raced as we approached, memories flooding back.

“This place looks smaller than I remember,” Akemi giggled, nudging me.

“Yeah, but it’s where we started. Every note, every word… This is our foundation.”

As we stepped inside, the familiar scent of old wood and spilled beer hit me. A few patrons sat scattered across the bar, but the stage stood empty, waiting.

“Let’s do it,” I said, adrenaline surging.

“Do what?”

“Let’s sing. One last time before the CMAs.”

She hesitated, a flicker of doubt crossing her face. “What if we mess up?”

I grinned, a plan forming. “Then we mess up together. It’s what we do.”

“Okay,” she said, her voice steadying.

“Ready?”

“Ready,” she replied, her eyes locked on mine.

We launched into our song, harmonizing perfectly, the notes spilling out with a mix of joy and nervous energy.

“Wooooo!” A voice yelled from the back, and I turned to see a few patrons clapping along.

“Feel that?” I shouted over the music.

Akemi nodded, her expression alight with excitement. As we finished, the crowd erupted into applause, clapping and cheering.

“Let’s do this tomorrow!” I yelled, and the audience cheered louder.

After we left the bus station, the streets were buzzing with anticipation for the CMAs.

“I can’t believe we just sang there,” Akemi said, her voice bubbling with excitement. “We have to do that again!”

“Definitely. But first, we have a trophy to win.”

The next day it dawned bright and clear. As we stood backstage at the Grand Ole Opry, the nerves began to creep in again.

“Darlene,” Akemi said, her voice low. “What if we don’t win?”

I took her hands, squeezing them tightly. “Then we’ll take this experience and learn from it. But we can’t let fear hold us back.”

She nodded, her eyes sparkling with determination. “You’re right. No matter what happens, we’re still Tokyo Cowgirls.”

The announcer’s voice boomed through the speakers, and my heart raced.

“Next up, Tokyo Cowgirls!”

“Here we go,” Akemi whispered, and I could feel the energy pulsing through her.

As we stepped onto the stage, the lights blinded me for a moment. The crowd roared, and my heart soared.

“Let’s do this,” I said, and Akemi nodded, her smile bright against the stage lights.

We began to sing, our harmonies weaving through the air, and for those few moments, it felt like nothing else mattered.

The stakes were high, but with every note, every word, we poured our hearts into that performance. And as we reached the final chorus, the world faded away, leaving just the two of us, lost in our music. When the final note rang out, the applause was deafening.

“Did we just…?” Akemi gasped, her eyes wide.

“We did,” I whispered, breathless.

“Whatever happens next, we did it together.”

And in that pivotal moment, I became fully aware of a profound truth. Winning was not merely defined by the physical accolades we received, such as trophies and awards. Instead, it encompassed the entire journey we embarked upon together, the melodies that resonated during our experiences, and the deep, meaningful connections we forged along the way. Regardless of the destinations we would reach or the challenges we might encounter on this road ahead, we had already achieved a state of victory; in our hearts and minds, we were undeniably champions.

**Pathway to the Country**

The sun rose slowly over Monroe, casting a warm glow across the horse farm I had called home for most of my childhood. Today was the day I had dreaded yet anticipated—the last day in Monroe. My heart felt heavy with a mix of sadness and nostalgia as I prepared for the closing ceremony. I glanced at my horse, Starlight, who was frolicking in the pasture, blissfully unaware of my turmoil.

I stepped outside, where the air was alive with the sounds of chirping birds and the gentle rustle of leaves. Arriving at the stable, I spotted Akemi kneeling on the ground, excitedly playing with Dixie's new puppies. When we came home from Nashville the puppies were already born. It was a big surprise! Just like that. They were as lively as ever, tumbling over one another, their little paws dancing in the tall grass.

"Look at them, Darlene!" Akemi exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with joy. "They're so cute! I can't believe you're leaving them behind."

I knelt beside her, feeling a lump form in my throat. "I know. I wish I could take them all with me."

Akemi laughed. "Rather, I was surprised to learn that Dixie was a girl."

Later, I found Annabelle in the barn that we once called home. Her gray eyes were serious as she looked at me, and I could see the concern plastered on her face. "Darlene, you have to promise something," she said softly. "No matter where you go, keep the memories of us in your heart forever."

I nodded, feeling the gravity of her words. "I promise. You all have made this place home. I'll never forget any of you."

As afternoon approached, I hatched an idea to leave a part of myself behind. I raced to the stables and gathered everyone from Monroe—friends, family, and neighbors. Together, we armed ourselves with paint brushes and buckets of vibrant colors, ready to decorate the stable walls with farewell messages.

"Wow, girls! Look at this" Sora exclaimed, a proud grin stretching her face as she embellished a unicorn alongside swirls of pink and blue. "Get it? Because you're a total unicorn, Darlene!"

"Or a horse," Annabelle chimed in with a playful smirk. "Unicorns don't sing country music!"

I giggled, a sound that felt foreign but cathartic at this moment. It was impossible for me to acknowledge the aching pit forming in my stomach while surrounded by friends who had become like sisters over our time here, sharing dreams, fears, and laughter—and now, we faced the unthinkable: separation.

Grabbing a paintbrush and a can of teal, I joined them. "Okay, let's not obsess over unicorns and horses," I said, my voice teasing. "We should work on a real masterpiece!"

I squatted down by the lowest part of the stable, my paintbrush gliding effortlessly against the weathered wood. I penned a flowing script: "Together, we can conquer anything."

"Love it!" Akemi cried, leaning down to inspect my handiwork. "But you know what would make it better? A karaoke mic!" With that, she flashed a sparkle in her eye and bounced back to her own corner. She had come up with an entire theme for our mural. As I painted on, she crafted around her words "Dream Big, Shine Bright" with little stars.

An hour later, the stables were alive with vivid colors and messages. We each stood back and admired our chaotic creation, painted in pastel and bright hues. At that moment, the impending farewell became just a whisper, tucked away under layers of shared joy.

As the sun climbed higher, Sora broke the fragile silence. "You know, Darlene," she began, fiddling with her paint-covered hands, "I can't believe you're leaving. We'll miss you so much."

I turned to look at her, her blue, expressive eyes shimmering with unshed tears. I swallowed hard, the lump in my throat suddenly feeling like a boulder. "I'll miss you all too."

I took a deep breath, and brushed away my tears with the back of my wrist. We had promised that we would not cry, and cherish my last day in Monroe. We would stay cheery with our best smiles, even if it killed us.

Just then, my family arrived. Dad walked towards me splattered with paint, his clothes speckled with yellow and blue. I couldn't help but laugh. "You guys look like walking rainbows!" I teased, my heart lightening.

The day culminated at the ceremony. As I stood before everyone, the weight of goodbye settled on my shoulders like a heavy blanket. I waved to the crowd, trying to capture each face etched in my memory. Together, Akemi and I took the stage, and the air shifted with energy as we announced our win at the Country Music Association Awards.

"We couldn't have done it without you, Monroe!" My smile was infectious. The crowd erupted in applause, and I felt a spark of pride for my friends who had become a family.

After the ceremony wrapped up, Tokyo Cowgirls made their way around the stables, sharing hugs and laughs with friends, as emotions ran high. I was congratulating them when a wave of despair washed over me. I had said goodbye to so many; would there be anything left for me to hold onto?

"It's not that the horses were slaughtered," Akemi remarked. "They flew away just like birds."

"Like, flap, flap?"

"They'll be taken care of by many people at a new place," Akemi said. "I think it's a very good thing, Darlene."

"I'll have to start over in Atlanta," I said sadly. "I'm scared."

"Me too."

"But I was able to become a country singer with you, Akemi. I think I'll be okay," I said. Akemi nodded, her heart heavy. "It's weird... when I moved to the United States, I never thought country music would be this popular around here."

I nodded slowly. We stood in silence in the now empty barn. All those impromptu karaoke nights within the stalls, the long rides along the countryside, and the warmth of bonfire nights that stretched until dawn — would hold a special place in my heart. I will never forget it. Never.

Suddenly, Akemi wrapped her arms tightly around me. "Darlene...Is this...really okay?"

"Yeah..."

I held Akemi in my arms and pulled her closer. "You'll never have to let go of me again."

"I love you, Darlene," Akemi whispered tearfully. " I want to be with you forever."

"Me too."

After a while, Akemi and I slowly released each other.

"It was really a lot of fun spending time with everyone," I said, smiling. "It's been a great year."

Akemi smiled. "Yep, it was."

Slowly, we shut the door to the barn, taking all the memories of us together with it. That uncertainty weighed heavier than I anticipated. At the end of the day, as I closed the fence that had seen countless rides and adventures, tears streamed down my cheeks. "I'm not crying!" I sobbed, struggling to catch my breath. "I'm not gonna cry!"

Just then, my friends surrounded me, pulling me into a tight hug. "You ain't alone in this," Annabelle said softly, wiping away my tears. "We're always with you in your heart."

I knew that she was right. With the help of my friends, I slowly found the strength to release the pain, even if just for a moment. We shared one last look at the horse farm and said our silent farewells.

Later, I climbed the fence, my heart full but aching. My family joined me, their presence a soothing balm. As I whispered my thoughts into the breeze, I felt a sense of warmth enveloping me—a reminder of the love I was leaving behind.

Dad looked at me and said, "You've grown so much, Darlene, and your journey is just beginning." His words echoed in my mind, and I spotted something glimmering in the sand—our CMA victory flag, waving bravely.

"Can I throw one last paper airplane?" I asked, my voice shaky. Dad nodded, an encouraging smile on his face. I folded the airplane, my heart racing as I sent it flying one last time towards the empty barn, where laughter and music once filled the air.

When it landed, I followed it, each step reigniting cherished memories. I let the waves of emotion hit me like a storm, remembering the times spent with the Tokyo Cowgirls—performing, laughing, and dreaming together.

Back at the entrance of the barn, all those memories surged back as I rejoined the Cowgirls one last time. Akemi stood with me on stage, each of my friends radiating warmth. She smiled at me, her eyes holding an unspeakable bond, and together we took a deep breath.

For our final performance, we sang "Wagon Wheel." Our voices intertwined, merging harmonies that echoed my emotions. Each word resonated with the love we shared and the memories we built. I realized, standing there with them, that the radiance I sought in the world had always been right there, within the bonds we forged together.

As the last note echoed through the auditorium, I understood that my horse farm would always be a part of me. And though I was leaving, the memories and friendships would never fade. Wherever I went, I would carry Monroe in my heart forever.

THE END